Isaac Asimov: All Four Stanzas

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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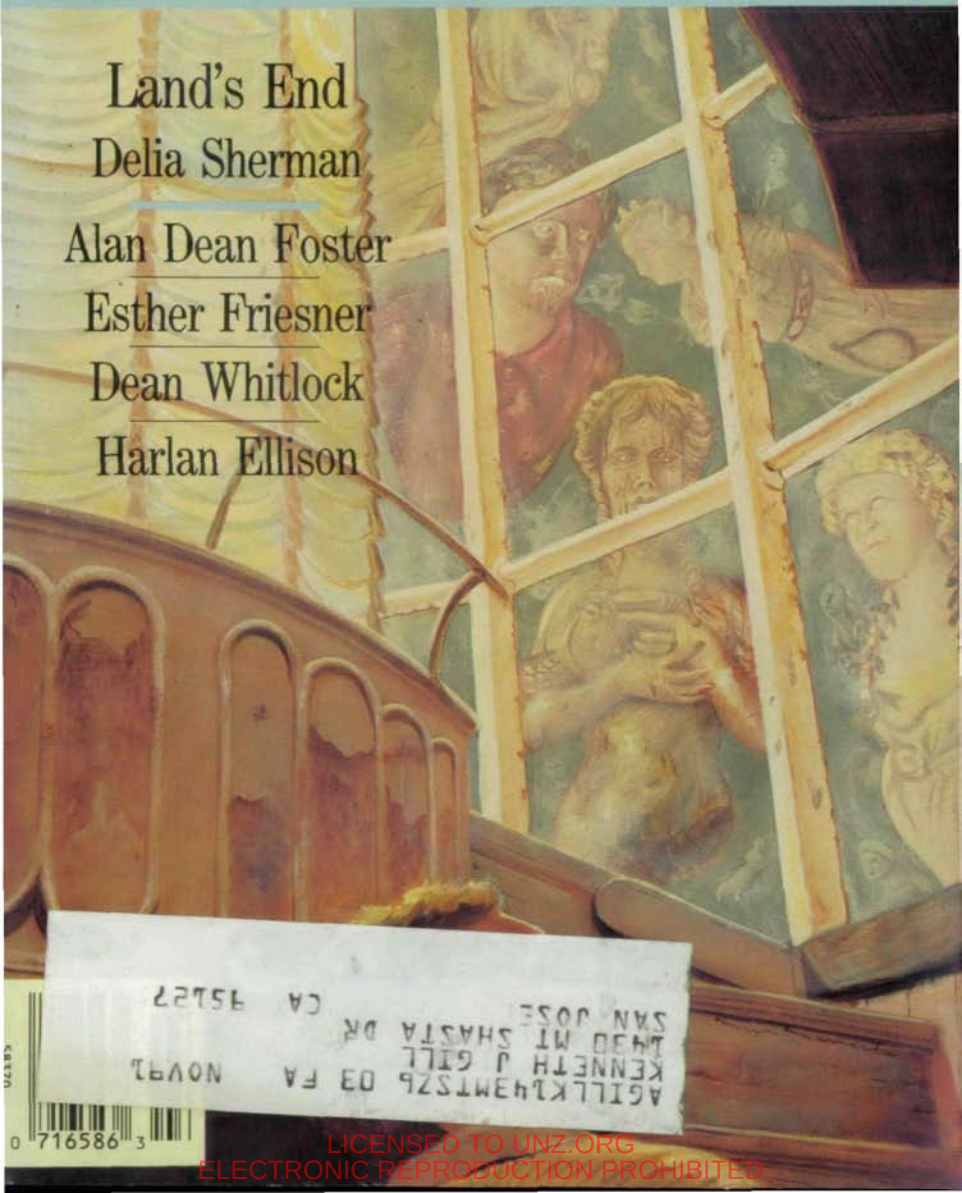

Land's End

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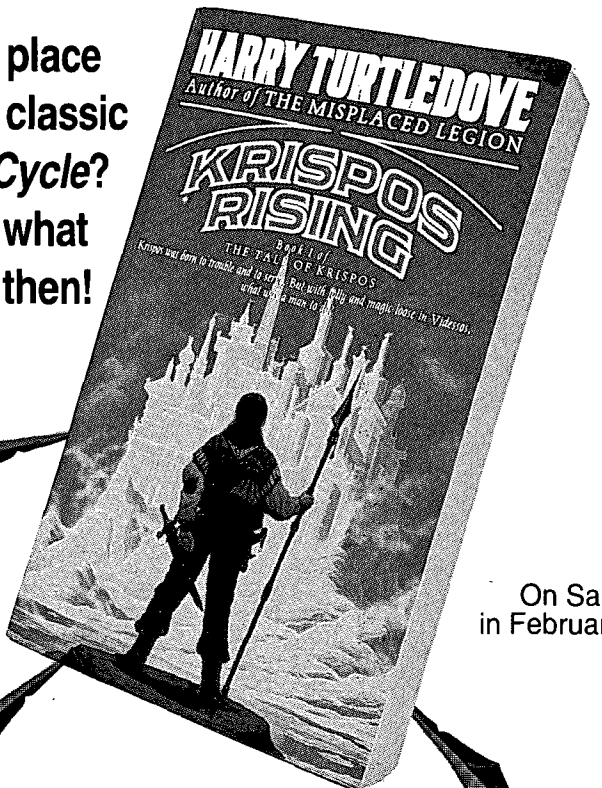

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Krispos had come to the imperial capital of Videssos, seeking what fortune a good mind and strong back could earn. He had a single goldpiece to his name—one claimed to carry magic.

But the night was raw, and the inn warm. Should he keep his lucky goldpiece or trade it for a warm, dry bed? The choice would lead to a world of peril and possibilty....

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BIOGRAPHY: "Lynn Hightower shares her office with a cat who hogs most of the desk. She is witty after two glasses of wine and cannot concentrate if there are M&Ms in the house. Her first two novels will be published by Berkley/Ace." And her first story for F&SF is a pure delight.

THE ROSE ELF

By Lynn S. Hightower

The fairest things have fleetest end,
Their scent survives their close;
But the rose's scent is bitterness
To him that loved the rose.
— Francis Thompson, "Daisy"

WHEN I THINK ABOUT Lane — when I can stand to think about Lane — I try to remember the early years. The pond, weed-choked and thick with mosquitoes, was still a magic place for us. We fished and caught nothing, sank our toes in the cool mud, soaked our feet in the green-scummed water. But those memories, sweet as they are, slip away quickly, and I am back at the top of the hill, and it is getting dark, and I am worried about my sister, Julie.

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Julie was nine then. In the past four months, both our parents had died, and we were alone on the farm with our brother.

I had promised to meet Julie at the house by suppertime. I was late, and dusk had settled, smokelike, gray. For safety's sake, I wanted to get home first, so I hitched up my skirt and I ran. The grass was high and dewy, tangling my legs and making my ankles itch.

The back door was open when I got there — it hung crooked on its rusty hinge. I hesitated, just for a moment, inhaling the elusive scent of the tea roses that climbed up the back of the house. I know I must have thought of the Rose Elf. I was past pretending he did not exist.

I paused in the dark kitchen. Brin sat in the gloom at the rough wood table — waiting, like a sheep, for his dinner. He had neglected to remove his heavy work shoes, and gray mud streaked the floor. Our mother would never have stood for it.

"You seen Julie?" I asked.

He shook his head and said no.

I lit the lamp, and my fingers shook. It took me three tries to catch the wick, but at last a glow of light warmed the room. It was full dark now outside.

Stew bubbled softly on the stove. The rich gravy aroma mingled weirdly with the acrid odor of Brin's sweat and cow smell. Brin tamped down tobacco in the bowl of his pipe with a thick and dirty thumb. He stared at me all the while.

The pipe looked small in his square, callused hands. He was a large man, broad-shouldered, eyes deep-set and heavy-lidded. Not unhandsome, when he cleaned up, if you liked them big and brutish. Women liked him, but he kept his eye on me.

He scooted back his chair and stirred in his seat. I got busy at the stove, spooning stew into bowls. I did not look over my shoulder, but I knew when he got up, and I knew when he stood at my back. The knife was what I needed. I cut cheese into hunks on the board.

He was close, too close. I could feel his warm breath, then the press of his hand on my back.

"Evana?"

His hand strayed down, caressing. I held to the knife and turned round.

A noise from the doorway startled Brin, and he snatched his hand away.

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Julie stood with her back to the darkness, her face pale in the lamplight, her freckles standing out. Her skirt barely brushed her ankles. There was a network of scratches on her thin, tan legs. Her feet were dirty. So was her dress.

Julie scooted beside me, brushing the back of my hand with hers. A thin girl, all angles and planes. Her tangled hair was tawny brown, and her eyes, her best feature, were large, blue, and stoic. She was pretty when she smiled, which was not often.

We ate our stew in silence, like half-starved animals, none of us overly clean. When Julie grabbed for the bread, she left a smear of dirt on the crust.

"I talked to the elf today," Julie said. Her mouth was full of stew.

Brin looked up and caught my eye. I read anger in his face, and loathing.

"Mainly, we talked about roses." Julie sucked the gravy off a chunk of turnip, and laid the white, bloodless vegetable beside her plate. "How lucky he is, to live in a flower, right on the very inside."

"Devil voices," Brin muttered, tearing a chunk of bread from the loaf.

Julie flinched as if she'd been hit, as indeed she had, many times. Our mother knew the Devil's work when she saw it, even in one of her own.

"If you had all *listened* when I told you about the mad dog, Papa would never have died. The Rose Elf warned us; he told us not to go out. He's good, and I love him — he takes care of me."

Julie's eyes were wide and tearless. I would have liked it better if she had cried. I put down my spoon, remembering Papa's agonizing thirst, his inability to swallow, the five days and nights of his screams.

"Don't!" Brin slammed his fist on the table, and stew slopped out of his bowl. "*Don't* bring the elf man up again. *She* may not have been able to beat it out of you, but I surely will."

"You *never* lay a hand on Julie." I leaned across the table and grabbed Brin's sleeve. "You will never touch my sister."

He jerked back, as if a snake had popped out of the slop jar. He twisted his lips in an embarrassed smirk and backed away from the table. He knocked his chair on its side and left the kitchen, muttering. I stared at his back — wishing! wishing! — just once to see fear in his eyes.

We washed up the bowls, Julie and I. She stayed close — I tripped over her twice.

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"What did the Rose Elf say?" I asked her.

She shrugged and smiled and said nothing.

"Don't bring him up, Julie, when Brin's in the room."

"He doesn't believe, and that's wrong."

"He does believe; that's the problem."

We stayed in the kitchen and talked for a while, waiting for Brin to get settled. Then we went in the parlor together. Brin had stripped off his shirt and laid it over the back of my chair. He had built a fire, though it was much too warm, and sweat was slick on his forehead. His underwear was gray with grime and rough washings. Wiry black hair curled from his chest. He smoked his pipe and flipped through Mama's tattered Bible, pretending that he could read.

His voice stopped us at the bottom of the stairs.

"Not going to bed now, are you, Evana?"

"Yes, Brin, I'm going to bed."

"I begin to think you avoid me."

Julie flicked hair from her eyes. "The miracle is, you begin to think."

His look was such she was half up the steps before she stopped and held ground.

"There's a tear in my shirt that needs fixing." Brin nodded toward my chair.

The veneer of normality kept us safe. Just a little more time, then we could escape. If he touched me tonight, I would kill him.

I sat in the chair and fingered the shirt, and Julie brought me my basket.

"Go to bed," he told her with a cold, tight smile. "It's late for little girls."

"Vannie and I like to go up together, so we can share the light."

Julie curled beside my chair, her back pressed tight to my knees. She squirmed and twitched, but could not stay awake. Sleep made her face sweet and young, and she coughed once, and shivered in her sleep.

"I'll carry her up," Brin offered.

"No need," I said. "Your shirt is done. Good night."

Our room was narrow and dark. Julie kept her back to the door while I lit a small lamp. We each took a side of the dresser and jammed it in front of the door.

"*Listen*," Julie said.

And I listened.

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Brin's footsteps were heavy on the stairs.

"Evana?" he said. "I need you. Could you come out for just a while?"

Julie put her finger on my lips, and I tasted the salt of her sweat.

"Evana?"

The doorknob twisted.

"I need to see you, now." Whiskey sloshed in a jug. "Do you want me to come in and get you?"

He beat the door with the meat of his fist, and with each blow the door bowed inward. My arms were quivering with tension and strain; Julie's face was chalky and drawn.

"It's not going to hold, Evana!"

"Evana, let me in!"

Brin sobbed once, pathetically. I thought of the amiable brother I had known as a child, but I knew not to open the door.

He was getting maudlin; he would settle for drink. His footsteps were loud, then soft. Julie leaned on the dresser and took a deep breath.

"He'll come back when we're sleeping; I know it."

"I'll be right here in front of the door. If he tries it again, I'll know."

Julie dragged the blanket off the bed and tucked it around my shoulders.

"I love you best, my Vannie. I'm scared that Brin's going to hurt you."

"As soon as we can count on the nights *staying* warm, we'll get away from here. When I say it's time, you be ready."

"But what about the Rose Elf?"

"The elf can take care of himself. We'll go to Granny Esher's. She's in Tiver now, living with her daughter."

Julie's eyes were full of tears. "But how do you know that she'll help us?"

I closed my eyes, and I was running again — side cramping, hair in my face, Brin's heavy footsteps behind me. Granny Esher's cottage was over the hill. I was safe there, if I could make it.

I patted Julie's head. "She'll help us."

Julie slept, finally, her head on my lap, both of us still in our dresses. Hours later I heard the doorknob turn, and the floorboards creaked in the hall. I held my breath and waited, but nothing else happened that night.

At midday next day, Julie did not come home, though it was well past time for our meal. I took off my hat and wiped sweat from my eyes, leaning against my hoe. The midafternoon sun was lush — Julie and I could leave

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soon. I nudged the fresh-turned dirt with the toe of my boot. Useless, to do all this work.

I thought that I knew where Julie might be. I headed up the hill to the graveyard.

A sagging picket fence circled our small family cemetery. The gate hung open, clumps of weeds pressed the fence, and the grass inside was high and ragged.

Julie was asleep beside our mother's grave, her fingers curled around my old doll, Lucinda. Julie had known when Mama was going to die. The Rose Elf had told her beforehand. I snapped the head off a dandelion and smeared yellow juice on my skirt.

I didn't just want to escape from Brin; I wanted to be rid of the elf. It was four days' walk to Tiver — we would stay off the road and sleep outside, and the cold ground can chill you quickly. It was still too early to leave. I should not have told Julie we were leaving the elf, until we were ready to go.

Which left the problem of Brin. There were herbs I could put in his dinner, to make him sleep through the night. What I needed grew down by the pond. I let Julie sleep, and went down there.

And that was when I found Lane.

I had not seen him for so long that I had given up missing him, or so I told myself. And there he sat on the rock by the pond, for all the world like we'd planned it.

He was tall and slender and rather loose-limbed. His hair was blond and flyaway, his eyes blue and alert behind round wire spectacles. He was barefoot right now, shoes and socks on the rock, his pants rolled up to his knees.

He stood up when he saw me, and smiled.

"*Lane!*" I shrieked, and I hugged him hard, knocking him backward near the water.

"Steady there, Vannie; you know I don't swim."

"Only rich people swim, you idiot."

He peeled me off his chest and held me at arm's length. Lane never let me hug him long enough.

"Evana, Evana, you grew up pretty."

"So did you, Lane. So did you."

He gazed in the water and tapped his nose. "I'm not so sure of the beak. How have you been, Evana?"

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"You promised to take me fishing."

He sat back on the rock — always lazy! He smiled and shook his head. "That was three years ago, Vannie. If you're only just here, you're late."

"I waited for hours and hours. I waited in the rain."

"Vannie, my heart, you're always the same. 'Hello, Lane dear, where the hell have you been?' I was waylaid, my dear, by your brother. So I went off to make my fortune — which I did *not* do, though I did learn a trade. Leather, Vannie girl, fixing shoes. A man in Tiver will take me on as a sort of a junior partner."

"But Lane, that's good; I'm happy for you." I sat next to him on the rock.

"I heard about your parents. I'm sorry. That's why I'm here. I was worried about you, Evana. Worried about you and . . . Brin."

I stared at the ground, and my face turned red. I did not want this talk.

He took my hand. He had long, slim fingers — so different, his, from Brin's. "How would you like to come with me?"

"What? Do you need a wife?"

"Ah God, she talks about marriage!"

"I have responsibilities, Lane."

"I was teasing, Evana, just teasing." He touched a hand to my cheek. "I haven't a home — there's no money. But you'll take me anyway, heart?"

"We'll both take you," I told him sweetly, and waited and watched his face. "You remember Julie, don't you? I can't leave her here with Brin."

"Julie . . . Julie . . . oh, the little brown hair. Freckles? A nose like mine? Makes me wonder about your ma and my pa."

"Oh Lane, don't tease. Will you take her?"

"Did you think, Evana, that I came here to fish?"

He kissed me then, lips warm and soft, and it was good just to feel him so close. He ran a hand up and down my spine, then undid the back of my dress.

"God, Vannie," he whispered. "Don't draw this out."

I undid his breeches and lifted my skirt, and he hoisted me up in the air. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and he stumbled backward, laughing, and fell.

He was braiding a dandelion in my hair, when I sat up and noticed the sky. A breeze sent ripples across the pond and stirred the weeds round my ankles.

"Get up, Lane, *pig*. Please hurry."

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I jumped up and gathered my clothes. Lane propped his arms under his head and watched, chewing a long blade of grass.

"We have to get Julie before it rains! She'll go straight to the cottage and Brin."

He reached for his shoes, but I grabbed his hand and ran with him up the hill. He winced when his bare feet hit the rocks, and he buttoned his pants as he ran.

The first bolt of lightning hit as we reached the cemetery. Large raindrops spattered the dirt, and the gate swung loose in the wind. Lucinda doll was facedown on the ground, her tattered dress bunched around her waist.

"She's gone," I said. There were tears in my eyes. "I'll have to go back one more night."

Lane took my hand. "I *know* Brin's big." He smiled and did not look afraid. "But I think we should just go and get her."

"In the dark and the rain with him knowing? Did you know that he has a gun? He used it when Papa. . . ."

"When Papa?"

"I'll have to meet you tomorrow. Right here, Lane, as soon as we can. One more night, then we'll all get away."

"I'll hide in the barn, then, you understand? I'll be close by if you need me."

He took my shoulders and kissed me; but there wasn't time for a kiss like that, and I squirmed free and pushed him away. I ran out of the cemetery to the rocky lane that led to the cottage and Julie.

The rain cut loose as soon as I went. I was soaked by the time I got home. In the kitchen the oil lamp was burning, and the smell of tobacco was strong. I ducked inside the doorway, my shoes making puddles on the floor.

"Come in, Evana."

I stepped forward warily, aware that my wet dress clung. I pushed back my hair and found the dandelion, tangled behind my ear. A flash of lightning lit the room. I turned and looked out the window.

"Brin," I said. "Where is Julie?"

"You've lost a button," Brin said.

I pulled a leaf from the back of my hair. There were burrs caught up in my skirt.

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"Where have you been, Evana?" Brin's chair scraped across the floor.

"At the graveyard, looking for Julie." I pressed to the edge of the counter and shut my eyes. I felt Brin's hand on my waist.

"Someone has been careless. These are done up wrong." He undid my buttons, so slowly. The dress fell open across my back, and the cold air made me shiver. He pressed his knees to the back of my legs.

"Where have you been, sweet Evana?"

He gripped my shoulders and turned me around, grinding his hips into mine. I jabbed my fist into his ribs, and he grunted, but pulled me close. He cupped my chin and lifted my face. I bit his lip when he kissed me. Blood trickled down, smearing us both, and the taste of it made me ill.

"Lane!" I screamed. "Lane, help!'

Brin was still for a moment, considering. "Lane's back? He's here?" He cocked his head. "Were you planning to see him, Evana? After I went to bed?" He touched my cheek, so gently. "Why won't you let *me* be nice?"

He went to the parlor to load his gun.

I took off, heading for the barn, wondering why Lane did not come. I slid the wide door open and entered, the hay smelling dark. I could just make out the bulk of the cows, and I could hear their snorts and sighs, and smell their damp musk odor.

"Lane?" I ran a hand along the rough plank walls, feeling my way step-by-step. Cobwebs and greasy dirt coated my fingers. Why didn't he answer when I called?

A shaft of light wobbled outside the door, and Brin came in with the gun.

"Where is he, Evana? Had his fun and gone home?" He raised his lamp and began to search, covering every part of the barn. "Not here, Evana. Now, where could he be? You used to meet down by the pond." Brin paused in the doorway and smiled at me. "I'll find him, Evana; don't worry. And then I'll be back for you."

I waited a moment until he was gone, then got a lamp from the house. Where were Lane and Julie? And then I remembered Lucinda doll, left on my mother's grave.

I held the lamp ahead of me and walked in the circle of light. Wispy streaks of rain sizzled on the chimney glass. The wind blew and flicked the flames.

"Julie? Julie!"

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Rain dripped down the neck of my dress. I wiped sweat and mist off my forehead. My shoes grew caked with black-gray mud, and my steps were clumsy and slow.

The cemetery gate still hung open. I carried the light to my mother's grave, but Lucinda doll was gone.

"Julie?" I said — but no answer.

I closed the gate behind me, banging it shut till it latched. I scraped the chunks of mud from my shoes and headed back to the house. White fog drifted across the grass, and I held the lamp up higher.

There was something — someone? — crouched by the kitchen door. I ran forward and held out the light.

Julie sat in the mud by the roses, her hands clasped around her knees. She blinked in the light, her eyes glazed and shocked. She was soaking wet, her dress heavy and sagging, and shivers rippled across her shoulders.

I touched her cheek and crouched beside her.

"I saw Brin," Julie said. Her teeth chattered. "He has the gun, Evana."

"Julie, did he see you? Did he hurt you?"

Julie shook her head, back and forth, back and forth. I took her cold, limp hand.

"It's all right, you know; you can tell me."

"He didn't see me, Vannie." Her eyes focused. "He'll *get* you, Evana. He'll get you. The Rose Elf has said what to do." She coughed suddenly, deep in her chest, and then leaned so close I could feel her soft breath, see the bloodshot lines in her eyes.

"Make Brin follow you down to the pond. Make him go with you into the water. The Rose Elf said you would know what to do." She shivered and looked away. "In front of the big rock — right to the front of it — the pond is shallow. You can walk and not go under. Twenty steps, Evana; remember that. Twenty giant steps. Then, to your right is another rock, but this one is *under* the water. It's *slippery*, Evana. Be careful; don't fall. All around there the water is deep. When he sees you out there, standing on the rock, he'll think it's safe to come in. But it'll be over his head, and he'll" — she hiccuped — "he'll. . . ."

I took her hand and led her inside, helping her change to dry clothes. She coughed violently, doubling over. I wrapped her in a wool blanket and hung her dress by the fire. Steam rose from the folds of the skirt, and droplets of water hissed in the flames.

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"I'll make you some tea," I told her. "As soon as you're warm, we'll go."

Lane would come; he would help.

And then, at last, I heard footsteps.

The front door slammed against the wall, and I ran out into the parlor. Brin set the gun in the corner.

"No sign of your lover, Evana. Took what he pleased and went home."

It hit me hard for a moment, and then I was numb and felt nothing. Lane had left me three years ago — why wouldn't he leave me again? He had agreed so quickly to marry me and take my sister along. Too quickly — I should have known it, but I suppose one believes what one wants.

"The wages of sin, Evana."

I looked at my brother and laughed.

"Go to bed now, Julie." He was pleasant. A man who has what he wants.

Julie stood in the doorway, frowning.

"It's all right, Julie." I nodded and smiled. "*I know what I'm going to do.*"

The room was silent but for my brother's quick breath and the pat of my sister's small feet.

"I loved him," I said.

"Love me instead."

I looked at Brin and considered. "It was at the pond that we did it. By the rocks, in the weeds, at the edge. We did things, Brin, you could never imagine."

He stumbled across the room and grabbed my arm, fingers digging hard in my flesh.

"*Tell* me, Evana. What did you do?"

I tilted my head back to look in his eyes.

"We did things in the water, Brin. You want me to show you what?"

"Take me there, Evana." His tongue flicked his bottom lip. "And show me what you did."

He pulled me along behind him and led me out of the house. His feet were heavy on the pathway, and the lamp banged a rhythm on his thigh. When I smelled rot and stagnant water, I broke free of his grip and ran. Lane's shoes were still on the rock, and the sight of them made me blush.

"No, stay!" I shouted.

Brin stopped.

My fingers were shaking, but I managed the buttons and pulled my dress down to my waist. Brin moaned softly and set the lamp down.

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He stepped forward, but I held up a hand.

"Turn your back for a moment, Brin. Lane did."

I thought at first he would not go along. But he turned with a sigh. He was trembling.

I took off my shoes, and then my dress, and everything underneath. Brin groaned and clenched his fists at every rustle of cloth.

The water was icy and spread like cold silk to my knees. Mud squished between my toes, and something cool and quick brushed my ankle. The deeper the water, the slower I went, breaking the surface scum with my hands. I pushed aside reeds and lily pads, counting twenty paces with care.

Number twenty left me halfway across, the water right up to my chin. I held my breath and stepped sideways, stretching my toes to the rock. I shivered as my shoulders emerged in the air. Water lapped under my breasts.

"You can turn around now, Brin."

I heard the quick intake of his breath as he stared across the water and went to work on his clothes. His fingers were quick and competent — he kept his eyes on me. His body was white in the lamplight, and matted with dark, curly hair. I shivered, and stared, and bit my lip, and braced my buckling knees.

Brin splashed into the water, sending ripples that swelled against my breasts. By the time the water caressed his thighs, he was no more than five feet away. He held out his hand, then slipped.

His mouth opened wide, and he went under. His head popped back up instantly, hair plastered across his face.

"Evana!" He swallowed a gulp of water and choked, went under again and came up. "Vannie!" He was coughing, sputtering. For a moment I could see the old Brin, the one who had been my friend. If I held out a hand, he might reach me.

"Help me, Vannie, please!"

His arms thrashed the water; his hands pawed the air. I saw fear in his eyes — fear at last.

Brin slipped under the water again. A fish jumped, rippling the surface, but Brin did not come up. I made my way back — listening — gliding cautiously through the scum.

I was shivering, once out of the water, my teeth chattering hard. I jerked the dress over my head and gathered the rest of my clothes.

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I left Brin's things where they lay.

I made it a step or two down the path, but could not resist a last look. No ripples creased the surface of the pond; no hand disturbed the reeds.

I swung the lamp when I turned away, and something glinted in the patch of cattail. I stepped off the path and bent down.

Lucinda doll smiled up in the lamplight, her dress pulled neatly to her ankles. Lane's glasses were open on her stomach, cushioned and protected from the ground. I squatted on my heels and looked at them. It took me awhile to understand.

I snatched up the doll and the glasses and ran barefoot all the way home.

Brin had left the front door open, and a wet breeze had blown raindrops in. Upstairs, the bedroom door was open. Julie was sitting up in the dark.

"Evana?"

"It's me. Brin's dead now."

She nodded and lay back down. I touched her cheek. It was hot and flushed. I sat on the edge of the bed.

"I found Lucinda for you."

Julie reached for the wet, muddy doll and tucked it up under the blanket.

"Why did you kill him, Julie?"

"I didn't, Evana; he drowned."

"Not by himself, he didn't. Lane was afraid of the water."

Julie grabbed a fistful of blanket. "I saw you and him in the cemetery, when I came back for Lucinda doll. And he was pulling on you, and grabbing you, and trying to make you kiss. He looked at you . . . like Brin did. I wanted to keep you safe! So I asked the Rose Elf to help, and he told me what to do."

She shivered, and I pulled up the covers. She sat up and took my hand.

"I saw his shoes, and I waited till I heard him on the path. Then I crouched down on the rock in the middle of the pond, and called and screamed for him to help. He knew my name! He called me 'Julie.' And he took off his glasses and jumped in after me. He was holding a stick for me to grab on. And I . . . took the stick and jerked it. He went under and came up. And under and came up."

She wrapped her arms round me and sighed. "There's no one to hurt you now. The Rose Elf will keep us safe. I love you, Vannie. I love you best."

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Jurassic Park, Michael Crichton, Knopf, $19.95

Lifeline, Kevin J. Anderson and Doug Beason, Bantam Spectra, $4.95

I AM ABOUT to tell you about a most curious book; a book by a best-selling author (which immediately makes it not SF, of course), as distinguished from a book by a best-selling SF author like, say, Isaac Asimov. But that is not what I'm going to talk about, actually. What I am going to talk about is the curious nature of Michael Crichton's book.

Michael Crichton of course has been around a long time, now, and his career has been, if not at the very top, very close. He is a doctor, and not just any kind of doctor but a onetime postdoc at the Salk Institute; a film director, including *Westworld*, *Coma*, and *The Great Train Robbery*, for the latter of which he wrote the novel. In fact, he is the author of numerous books of fiction — beginning with *The Andromeda Strain* — and nonfiction, of which the one I have read is *Five Patients*, and pretty darned good it was, too. And now he has written a new novel, *Jurassic Park*, and I am supposed to tell you whether to buy it or not, and why.

But I'm not quite ready to do that.

Instead, I wonder about certain things. For one thing, the fact that this is already scheduled for a movie. All right, that's not too unusual. But I wonder what kind of movie, and what I come up with is Disney, and what I further come up with is that this is a novelized screenplay. That is somewhat different from a novel.

Disney (although this is not a sure bet) because the novel has a prepubescent pair of siblings in it, a boy and a girl, and the girl, in particular, is nauseatingly tiresome; a greedy, thoughtless, inconsiderate brat with *no* redeeming features whatsoever. Not even Michael Crichton, who is not noted for his characterizations — but is not actively bad — would normally write her so one-dimensionally.

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Then there is the absence of sex. At best, there is a PG-13 scene or two; actually, I have not read so squeaky-clean a book in I don't know how long.

And there are too many people in this book. I don't really know how to explain what I mean. But all sorts of characters get introduced, only to be never heard from again or relegated to mere mentions; this could be sheer inertia on Crichton's part — he introduced them, found he didn't really need them, but was not moved to rewrite the front of his book if he didn't absolutely have to — but I don't think so. I think this is, in some way, an intrusion from the film. Either way, of course, it's a bit of a flaw in the novel.*

But that's as may be. Meanwhile, the why you should buy it takes longer.

You should buy it, not necessarily first of all, because it's written in English. This is a language which is rapidly going out of style among bestseller authors, and presumably bestseller readers, too. You, however, will enjoy the way it recalls the joys of just plain reading a straight, unvarnished sentence, yet exactly the right sentence. You will find that Crichton gives exceptional value in that respect.

**It's a bit of a flaw in the film, too, of course, but I'll leave that for Harlan.*

You should buy it, too, for the storytelling involved. It is not perfect in this respect — some of the incidents which get you into the book are not, as I said earlier, fully justified by the events that follow. But it is far better than most, and almost as good as the very best. I will continue to carp and cavil at the book as this review goes on, but the fact is that it's a pretty good read, and those are getting scarcer by the day.

You should buy it for the idea, which is that a very rich man has sponsored research that led to the birth of dinosaurs — or something, cloned from dinosaur fragments, that very closely resembles dinosaurs — and the same very rich man has constructed a theme park, on an island off the coast of Costa Rica, which will display these creatures. The theme park is about to open.

In what may be a storytelling error, Crichton tells you up front that the scheme does not work; that it leads to disaster, as a matter of fact. That reduces this story to a procedural drama — we read it not to see *if* it will go wrong but *how* it will go wrong, and I fail to see what advantage this confers.

Let's get something out of the way. Crichton, characteristically, for all his gifts, is inclined to let the details go in the end; this is sloppiness, not lack of native talent.

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Therefore, this aspect of Crichton's work is, to my mind, little short of disgraceful. On the other hand, a Crichton book characteristically gives very good value for money. Perhaps we should not ask for more ... even though it seems that Crichton could give more.

Let's go back to the story, which concerns, largely, the adventures of various people who have been flown to the island, in a last-minute inspection party before the island opens, by the very nervous investors ... plus the kids, boy and girl, who have been flown in by their doting grandpa, the aforementioned very rich man.

The very rich man, it seems, was not rich enough to carry the ball himself. The investors are nervous — and Japanese — because of various factors. The lawyer who is their point man has, in effect, carte blanche; he can reduce the place to rubble, if that seems warranted. And Grant — the good guy — and his cohort, Ellie, who it turns out in the end he does not have designs on, nor she on him — tends to share this feeling more and more as events unfold.

Events — well, you seen one dinosaur film, you have, indeed, seen 'em all, though I will pay money to see this particular one — events, as I was saying, pursue a pretty predictable path. But Crichton has skillfully disguised this by (a) talking about DNA a good deal, and (b) giving his dinosaurs personality.

The problem, really, is that some frog DNA got into the mix. Crichton explains this; Wu, the chief biochemist, was able to extract almost sufficient dinosaur DNA, and saw no reason not to use frog DNA to bridge the relatively tiny gaps. Take my word for it, this makes macabre sense. Unfortunately, while Wu's dinosaurs look like dinosaurs, and move like dinosaurs — in a frightening, birdlike manner which, Crichton says, is much more likely than the old reptile model of our youth — there are a few hidden glitches. Specifically, while Wu may think that all he has created are females, frogs have a habit of changing sex under certain conditions, which have been met, and the result is that the dinosaurs are secretly breeding.

This was not figured-in in the plans for the theme park. The plans for the theme park specifically called for two safeguards. One; all the dinosaurs are slightly tinkered with so that unless they get an additive in their food, they die. And they can only get the additive in the food provided by the park. Two; all the dinosaurs are female, as I said. Oh, and they're kept track of, constantly, by a computer program and motion sensors, so that the kind

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of dinosaur and their number are always up-to-date and controlled.

But if they're breeding secretly, which is the case, apparently they don't breed true: the clandestine births don't need the food additive, as I understand it. And the tracking program does not actually track; it *assumes* there can't be more dinosaurs than the legitimate breeding program allows for.

And so forth. But let me tell you, Crichton's dinosaurs are genuinely frightening, and genuinely different from each other, and whereas you might stand a chance against the old-model dinosaur, with its slow ways and cold blood, and its resemblance to the reptiles, the birdlike hot-blooded creatures Crichton postulates you will *not* get away from, under all but the most extraordinary circumstances. This is the reason I'll see the movie; I want to see those suckers.

And that brings us to *Lifeline*, the first of at least three collaborations between Kevin J. Anderson, whom I find a very likeable writer, and Doug Benson, whom I am going to find a very likeable writer.

Lifeline is a hard SF problem story. The *Aguinaldo, Orbitech I, Kibalchich*, which are three orbital colonies of Earth, and Clavius Base, on the Moon, are all cut off with the outbreak of World War III on Earth. The book concerns itself with how they solve that problem, which they do.

This is not easy. *Aguinaldo* is a Philippine colony, and self-sufficient, if not tastefully so, thanks to Dr. Saandoval's invention of wallkelp — a cross-genetic experiment that paid off in cattle feed, and now, yuggy though it is, pressed into service as human food. Dr. Saandoval, who is a very-human geneticist, also has invented sail creatures — another cross-genetic experiment which results in whalelike creatures swimming in weightless air at the colony's core, but which expand into almost infinitely thin film, and react strongly to photon pressure, when thrust out into space.

Orbitech I is another matter; almost entirely industrialized, and incapable of surviving without outside supplies, *Orbitech I* is the home of, among 1500 other people, Karen Langelier, who has invented weavewire — a strand one molecule thick. It is also the home of Curtis Brahms, who begins his reign as *de facto* head of state by jettisoning the 150 least efficient people into space.

Kibalchich is the Soviet satellite. It conceals a deadly secret. Also Commander Stepan Rurik, Anna Tripolk, and Cagarin, the KGB chief, as well as 150 other people. *Glasnost* has given way to conservatism

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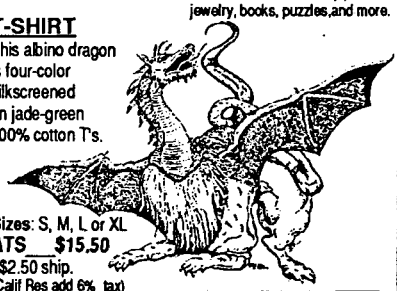
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again, and as an inevitable consequence of that, World War III. *Kibalchich* broadcasts a warning to the other Lagrange satellites that it is to be left strictly alone, and then, unbeknownst to anyone outside, puts everyone into suspended animation, using a process developed by Anna Tripolk. Everyone, that is, except for Rurik and Cagarin . . . who have a deadly game of their own to play.

Clavius Base was minding its own business, barely self-sufficient, when 200 engineers who had been working on the incomplete *Orbitech II* were suddenly pulled out and "temporarily" shifted down to the Moon — where they will now stay, unfortunately, thus dooming everyone.

The two principal actors in the novel — although there are many almost as important — are Duncan McLaris, who begins the book on board *Orbitech I*, and Ramis, a Filipino boy, who begins it aboard *Aguinaldo*. If I had to pick one, I'd pick Ramis.

But the point of reviewing this book by two writers whom you barely know, and certainly don't rank with the best, is that you're wrong. They write a workmanlike prose — what used to be known as "transparent" prose, so devoid of personality that you don't realize it's there at all, and are free to get on with the story. (It is, by the way, devilish hard to write until you have practiced it for a number of years.) More, they people their cast with *people*. Dr. Saandoval is far from alone in being not just the genetic specialist but in also having foibles; every one of Anderson's and Beason's principal characters is a little bit wrong and a little bit right, doing the best he or she can by his or her lights; only Ramis is almost admirably heroic, and even he, really, stays firmly on the ground (so to speak).

Good. Really, really good; bring on the other two books you promise, Bantam.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Isaac's Universe: Volume One: The Diplomacy Guild, Martin H. Greenberg, ed. (Avon, paper, 258pp, $3.95); stories by Robert Silverberg, David Brin, Robert Sheckley, Poul Anderson, Harry Turtledove; introduction by Isaac Asimov

MANY YEARS from now, humans have joined spacefaring society. Each of the species that has achieved starflight has its own particular needs, and since they rarely overlap, there's no reason for serious conflict. Except that an ancient race, far more advanced than any of the current group, has left behind some really extraordinary artifacts, and since those *are* a limited resource, which any or all of the races might be able to use, it is around those artifacts that competition arises.

Best of all, most of the ancient artifacts are massive, incomprehensible and inert—until one of them decides, for reasons of its own, that it's time to boogie. Then the writers get to do all that sense-of-wonder stuff that we all loved when we first picked up on science fiction with *Galactic Derelict* and *The Time Traders* back in seventh grade or whenever.

In other words, this is old-time science fiction by the guys who know how it's done. Don't expect the kind of masterpieces that Harlan Ellison's *Medea* project inspired — that was a one-of-a-kind event. Instead, you should open *Isaac's Universe* expecting the old-time religion, the 1950s tent meeting kind of sci-fi that we cut our teeth on.

Inevitably, the writers all homed in on the strongest aspect of their shared future: The alien artifacts. Therefore the stories can feel a bit repetitive: Representatives of several different races gather around an incomprehensible alien artifact, each one uncertain what the others know or what they're going to do; then they have (sometimes) adventures or (usually) conversations until Something Really Big happens.

All the stories are good reading. Oh, Brin indulges in some gratuitous characterizations — you know, the way he does when he remembers that he's supposed to create characters, but he doesn't understand yet that the characterization is supposed to have some relationship to the events in the story. And Anderson keeps

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trying to juice up emotions that his story just hasn't earned. But those are old habits that we've long since learned to overlook. The Silverberg is a perfectly polished artifact, as we have learned to expect from him; and perhaps it isn't a surprise that the newest of the writers, and perhaps the least science-oriented, turns in the tale with the most fire in it. Harry Turtledove's "Island of the Gods" not only has the best and clearest *idea* of any of the stories in the book, it also has interesting characters which, while they remain fairly obvious, actually make choices that change the outcome of the story.

The series promises to be a good one. I just hope that later writers don't keep repeating the same pattern, or our senses may give out from an overload of quotidian wonder.

The Little Country, Charles de Lint, (Morrow, cloth, 544pp, $22.95)

Janey Little is a musician. She tours and records, playing folk music — not fake-folk, but the real thing, the songs that have magic in them because they were first sung by the people who still knew how to touch that other world. When she loses her lover and fellow-performer all at once — the same man, unfortunately — she goes home to her grandfather's old Cornish village, where she discovers something hidden in a trunk of his. It's a book by her grandfather's old chum, Dunthorn, one of her favorite authors. Only she's never heard of *this* book. Not a surprise, really — it was published in an edition of one copy.

So she starts to read the story of a young girl who gets herself turned small by a witch, and then has to enlist the help of her friends in defeating the witch and getting free of the spell and perhaps finding happiness and saving the world in the process. The trouble is, whenever the book is opened, it attracts the attention of some extremely dangerous people — members of a secret order of string-pullers who like to think of all the world as their own puppet show, and really resent it when other people don't cooperate and dance on cue.

Usually when somebody writes a book within a book, one level is really good and the other is just something to fill up pages till you get back to the good part again. In *The Little Country*, de Lint has achieved almost perfect balance, making both stories equally compelling, making them intricately interconnected, but *never* playing the cheap trick of literally bringing both casts of characters together at the end. He walks so many tightropes all at once that you'd think he would fall off *one* of them — but he never does.

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I've gone on record saying that Charles de Lint is the best of the post-King contemporary fantasists, the one with the clearest vision of the possibilities of magic in a modern setting. None of this splatter stuff. De Lint isn't interested in making you puke. He *is* interested in making you grip the pages till your hands lock in place, or turn them so fast you accidentally tear them out. De Lint is second to no one in his ability to depict evil — genuine, heartstopping *believable* evil that you begin to think you might have met once, and not all that long ago, either.

More important, though, de Lint is a true believer in the immanence of magic. Not that he buys into the hexes and positions stuff; rather he believes in something like a literalized interpretation of Jung, where the secret collective dreamworld is as real as the public yet isolated realities that we drone through during the hours when we *think* we're awake. He uses music as a point of entry into the magic. There's a danger for him there, as a writer, that someday he'll depend too much on evoking the innate magic of music and not enough on the story itself; but in *The Little Country* he never goes over the edge into preciousness or self-indulgence.

How best to sum it up? *The Little Country* isn't just about singers. This book *sings*.

This Boy's Life: A Memoir, Tobias Wolff, (Harper/Perennial Library, paper, 288pp, $8.95)

Most memoirs suffer from the fact that the present writer, being older and wiser, is constantly intruding into the narrative, reminding us that of course he's *much* wiser now. Wolff doesn't do that. He shows you the boy he was — the moral blindness, the selfishness, the fear that kept him from stopping the worst parts of his life when they were still stoppable. He paints an unsparing portrait of a boy whose mother is repeatedly victimized by her bad judgement of and hunger for men; he shows each step he takes to try to make his way in the world; and finally, at the end of the narrative, we watch the boy cross a moral threshold that too few humans ever cross. Yet he does it without even being aware, at the time, of what he has achieved. Most of us had idyllic childhoods compared to this; most of us, as children, would not have been much attracted to this boy; but it is impossible to read this book without loving the boy, because we have lived inside him through all the crucial moments of his self-creation.

Not science fiction. Heck, not even fiction. Just a fine, fine book.

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Dean Whitlock's last story here was the amusing THE FAX MAN (September 1990). His latest story is a much more serious, though not depressing, tale about a young man with AIDS. It is also about a future with inhuman laws, a time loop, and love . . .

On the Death of Daniel

By Dean Whitlock

DANIEL FLOATS IN a city night, a state of haze and heat, but mostly a state of being. Lights flare and blur. Sounds mutter. Even the press of his feet on the sidewalk comes in and out of focus. Daniel floats in this moment. He has disowned his past. He has no future. He has AIDS. And now, while he is still healthy, he floats in and out of panic, drifting down a city street (familiar now from many passings) toward a neoned doorway (also become familiar), and steep, narrow steps that will take him down to a cool and noisy eddy that keeps its strangeness no matter how often he first comes.

But before the door, at the top of the stairs, stands a heavyset man with a tattoo and a piggish face and eyes that don't smile. Daniel smiles anyway (though he knows he'll get no response) and says, "Good evening."

And the man says, "Can I see your wrists?" with a voice that doesn't smile, either.

So Daniel nods as though he understands that the man is paid to do

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this and doesn't enjoy it. And he holds out his wrists to show they are bare. There is no bracelet, no medical badge, no bell looped around Daniel's wrist. Not tonight, though he can feel the weight where it should rest. He can feel the ghost bracelet that isn't there, that he took off and left on his bureau when he realized that he couldn't be alone again tonight.

The big man nods back, still not smiling, and lets Daniel through, to drift down the stairs, back tingling, waiting to be called back (though he knows he won't be), feeling guilty and only a little free at this moment of courage and guile.

He descends into cold. He passes into a press of bodies, skin cooling suddenly in what should be a sweaty crowd, fooled by air-conditioning. Music from the corner distracts him into stillness, but it blends quickly with the many shouted whispers, and becomes part of the strange humming that has blurred his hearing since he heard the doctor say —

The panic comes, as quickly as ever. He quells it, with the force of panic, and with it the murmur of the past. The music blares into focus, voices into words. He is here and now.

He scans the bar for a space (sees Eve immediately this time, sitting at the end by the wall in a pool of tinted light), but finds nothing. The tables are full; the dance floor is full, bodies pressed close, almost too close to move, feet barely touching the floor. They all float with him, parting slightly as he slips through to a gap at the bar.

He leans in by a woman in white — white dress, white hair, pearls on white skin. She glances at him and smiles. Her teeth are yellow. He smiles, too, but she has turned back to her partner. Still, she smiled. No drawing back, no cold stare. And why not? No one here has a badge. No one here is infected. Everyone here is a Safe Date. Maybe even an Immune. The man at the door is their safety. He and the law.

Daniel catches himself rubbing his wrist (a gesture he cannot remember to avoid), and raises his hand instead to catch the bartender. *See,* he thinks, *my wrist is bare,* and he smiles at his own audacity.

The smile dies as he turns back around and sees a police officer standing at the bottom of the stairs. He freezes (though he should have known) and feels his heart racing. The crowd stills in widening rings, as crowds do whenever the police come round. Eyes flick to the stairway. Speech slows as the speaker considers recent crimes. The music seems louder.

Daniel turns half away, pretends to study the woman in white. The

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officer studies the crowd, then smiles as a man comes forward and shakes his hand. They laugh and disappear up the stairs, and the volume resumes. The music fades. But Daniel is caught in a film of his imagining. He feels rough hands on his arms, hears voices speak his name and demand to see his bracelet.

I lost it, he will say, his practiced excuse, only a misdemeanor to be without it.

Why are you here? they will ask.

For a drink. For the music.

For the company? they will press.

And the answer is yes, though he cannot say it. Because that will lead to conclusions about the type of company he wants and needs. And that would be more than a misdemeanor. Five years just for lying. To lie and then make love is called murder, but even five years will be life for Daniel. Five years will be more than enough. Five years of slow dying in prison in a ward of other liars.

The panic starts, and Daniel fights it, because tonight he needs the company, needs it more than he fears. He shuts off the future, real and imagined, takes the drink the bartender brings him, pays and tips, and drinks, ignoring the hard, rattling ice in the glass in his shaking hand.

The crowd shifts, and he lets it push him away from the bar. He looks around, trying to be a part of this talking, dancing press of living people, to feel as healthy as he looks. Almost, he fails. He feels the space around him widen. He feels the dancers shift away, their eyes turning, knowing. He sees a death grin on their faces, all the same hollowed stare.

All but Eve, who smiles at him from her pool of tinted light by the wall at the end of the bar. And suddenly there is a space beside her, a place to sit. He needs the seat as much as he needs her smile. He slips through the crowd. Just in time, he claims the stool and her company.

She watches him sit, almost laughing. (Light and laughter, that is her nature.) She toasts him with her half-full glass. "Impressive," she says. "Are you a gymnast?"

"Just desperate," he replies, using the truth as a joke to hold back reality. He raises his glass to her toast and drinks. Then he can smile and look at her.

Her hair is thick and long, loose curls and tight waves that frame an open smile and hazel eyes. The tinted light hides its true color (auburn).

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He sees a glint of silver through the hair (a curled serpent earring — did he notice it so soon before?), and more at her throat, drawing a glance down her slender neck to a dipping line of blue cloth that frames her shoulders.

"That's a beautiful dress," he says. "Is it silk?"

She nods her head, still smiling. He looks again. It lies along her body, cool and smooth. He wants to touch it, and her skin, too. He feels desire, sudden and immediate, and a relief from the panic that almost sent his body running up the stairs a moment before. The tensions in his body have altered. She gives them new focus.

"It's beautiful," he says again. "My name's Daniel. Can I get you another drink?" It comes out in a rush, and sounds like it. He curses his awkwardness. He has no experience in bars, picking up dates. He has been married most of his adult life. Has been. No longer.

Another face appears on hers, a double image, the past insisting on its place in his life. And he would let it, except that one good memory leads to all the bad, the recent past, and he will not watch her die again.

"Are you there?"

Eve's voice breaks through the vision. Her face comes back into focus. Her smile is gone for the moment, replaced by an appraising glance that is still rich with humor.

"Sorry," Daniel says quickly. He takes a deep breath. "Your dress reminded me . . . forget it. Do you want to dance?"

"I'd rather have the drink."

Good. I'm not much of a dancer." She tilts her head and he realizes how odd he must sound. "Or a drinker, but I'd like to have another one with you."

"Gin and tonic will do fine. On the light side."

"Light side." He raises his hand, and realizes only after the bartender is gone that his wrist no longer feels bare. He feels safe on this stool beside her. He is not alone. He is not marked.

"I'm Daniel," he says. She laughs, and he remembers. "I already said that, didn't I?"

"Yes," she says, "and I told you my name." She waits, mischief in her smile, challenging him to admit that he doesn't remember.

"Eve," he says (but he can't honestly say if he heard or if he already knew).

"Very good," she says. "You're not a complete vacuum."

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"Do I act like one? I guess I do." He looks around, but all he sees is haze and shadow. Looking at her is much easier. She stays in focus. "This place is a little hard to take," he says. "It's hard to keep a train of thought."

"Why are you here?" She has a gentle way with questions.

"Looking for company, I guess."

She nods, and the bartender brings their drinks. They are silent a moment while Daniel pays, and silent again afterward. Daniel looks into his drink. He looks at her. She is looking at him. He starts to look away, embarrassed, but her eyes hold him. He thinks he should say something, but all he can do is look. Finally she smiles again. Color washes her cheeks. She drinks, still looking at him over the rim, and still silent. For a long moment (was it always this long?), they share a quiet space walled off from the music and the cold conditioned air.

Then a man shoulders in behind Daniel, bumping his arm and spilling his drink. The sound breaks in, and the space is gone.

"Hey, sorry. I'll get you another one."

"No, thanks, it's O.K."

"How about you, love?"

Eve shakes her head.

The man keeps talking, but she inclines her head toward the door. Her eyes ask a question. Daniel feels his heart race: not panic, but almost as sharp. He is glad he doesn't have to speak. He nods back, and she slips off her stool. He follows. She moves deftly through the crowd, pausing only long enough to reach back and take his hand. Her skin is as soft as he imagined. She is slender, smaller than—

He watches the back of her head, the thick curls brushing her bare shoulders, thinking only of that. By the time they reach the stairs, he is breathing normally. He is here and now, with Eve, holding her hand and climbing the stairs. Their thighs brush, silk on linen. She is light on her feet (light and laughter), and she leads him up to the hot street, past the unsmiling man who watches them go without expression.

They pause at the curb, and she says, "Which way?" Her voice is softer now, with only traffic to talk over. The busy city seems almost quiet.

Daniel shrugs. He looks left and right. And right again, where a police officer stands at the corner, watching them without expression.

"This way," he says, going left.

She lets him keep her hand. He wonders at how this happened, what

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did he do or say to make it happen so quickly. He watches her profile as they walk down the street. Her eyes are quick, moving from face to face of the passersby, interested. She smiles a little. *She finds life easy,* he thinks. He hopes the easiness will rub off, at least for the night (it will, but then—). He worries that the evening is moving too fast. He has no plan, no place to go, and would be content to walk here beside her a long time.

They pass by a theater, and she names the film. "Have you seen it?"

"No. What's it like?"

Now they have a topic, and they can talk. And after movies, they talk about plays. She mentions the symphony, but he's off his ground there, so they talk about food for a while. Then she points out a woman walking by them.

"A lioness," Eve says. "Watch her move. And that man there, a lizard. Look at his eyes."

So they watch the people and name the animals that inhabit each body. And Daniel watches Eve, but he cannot see her creature. She moves with her own grace. She speaks through her eyes. He still has no plan, except to keep walking as long as she is willing.

Somewhere a clock strikes one. They stop in the middle of crossing the street, still holding hands. The traffic has thinned. The night is cooler. She smiles up at him, then rises on tiptoe to brush his lips quickly with her own. He grins back, realizing finally (though he knows he already knew) that they will make love soon. He squeezes her hand. That is enough for now.

"Your place?" he says, not really asking. His own is too bare, too new. He gave up the old apartment, and everything in it, right after—

She nods, saving him from his memories. "Sure." She leads him uptown, looking for a cab. He watches her hair again, being here and now with her. And when they are seated in the cab, he reaches out and runs his hand along her shoulder and through the thick tangle at the base of her neck. She brushes his lips again and settles in the crook of his arm, so he can lean his cheek against her hair and wonder if the musk he smells is the scent of auburn.

And in her apartment, he takes her in his arms and buries his face in her hair, rubbing her back and her shoulders and trying to slow down, so the night will last as long as it can. They don't kiss deeply, not in this age, even with the laws and the bracelets and the safe clubs with their un-

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smiling guards. Daniel is glad for that. On one level, he is in love, and he will not risk this light and laughing life he holds in his arms. They let their lips brush. They rub each other gently. She laughs and slides the dress off her shoulders. She is small-breasted, sleek and taut. Smiling, she undresses him. He holds her again and tries desperately not to rush.

Her place is a studio, and when she pulls out the bed, it seems to take up most of the space. They take up most of the bed, touching slowly, a long time touching, with the lights dimmed and the window opened to the breeze and the soft noise below. She is ready for him now; he knows this and wishes it could take even longer. She reaches for the table, and he reaches for his clothes, and they both laugh at the sudden wealth of condoms. She makes a ritual of putting them on, stroking him, sliding the first and then the second slowly down. It becomes a part of their loving.

Daniel is grateful for her ease with it, for the protection it gives her, even for the loss of sensitivity. It is still all he can do to keep from a climax as he enters her. It has been too long, she is too willing, his need too great. He holds her as tightly as he can, face buried in her hair. She pushes him up, and they roll over, so he can lie still while she moves against him. He rubs her thighs and her breasts, strokes her hair. She brushes his lips with her own.

He comes first, a soft, drenching rush of joy, pushing up to be as deep within her as he can. Arching up to kiss her musky hair and pull her back down against him, to press himself so close he can pretend they are one body and he is not alone. She keeps moving, pressing back, squeezing with her arms and her thighs, and when she comes with a quiet cry, he feels himself swept along with her in a second rush that seems to last for several lives. This is where he would end it, now, when he loves her and feels her love the most.

His hands are tangled in her hair, her hands in his. She lifts her head and stares into his eyes, both still pulsing, still lost in love that ignores the circumstances of the night. She opens her mouth and presses her lips to his, pushing her tongue deep into soft, tender places. He forgets the rules and pushes back. She squeezes him with her legs again and again.

Then, with a sigh, they both relax. She lies across him, breathing gently in his ear. He fondles her hair, lost, remembering the touch of her tongue on his. Then wondering at his lack of caution. Then worried. Are his gums sore? Are they bleeding? How did he let that happen? How did he let this

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evening happen? (Could I have stopped it there, before the kiss?)

She starts to lift up, but he holds her hard.

"Wait," he says. "Wait, please." And he reaches down carefully and holds the condoms as he slides free of her.

She smiles and touches his cheek. "So careful," she says.

He can't reply without telling her the truth. And he can't dare that, not so soon after and still in love. He can imagine her face when he tells her, and feels a chill of new panic, not of death, but of losing her smile. He fights that down as desperately as the other.

"I'll get something," she says, and she brushes his lips to tell him she's not worried.

He watches her go into the little bathroom, admiring the way she moves, and watches as she come back to sit beside him on the bed and take the condoms in a plastic bag. She starts to wipe him dry, but he stops her. He takes the tissues from her and wipes himself carefully.

And there, with his hands on his shrinking penis, hunched and naked on the bed, he hears the sound of feet and voices in the hall, hears the pounding fist on the door. It flies open, crashing against the wall, and four men push into the little room. Two wear uniforms. Their badges catch the dim light.

Eve rises, unashamed, and Daniel loves her even more in that moment.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demands.

Daniel doesn't hear the answer. Only the echo, AIDS. His eyes are fixed on the badges. He sees the prison ward, the beds, the tubes. He hears the sound of coughing, from lungs blocked with fluid. His lungs work at nothing. His vision narrows to a point.

He sees Eve, slowly turning. He sees his death in her dying smile. Then panic comes and takes him by the throat. He beats at it, with a strength and fear that almost blind him.

He sees Eve, slowly turning. Panic fills him.

He sees Eve, slowly turning, and he stops her. Panicked, he stops her. Empowered by fear and a mad will to live, Daniel tears a hole in space and time. He flees back to the present. He will not live the future that he sees.

Daniel is in bed, sweating and cold. For a moment he is lost, floating in a bed in a room he can't quite see. Then he sees his own near-empty room. Light seeps in around the shades. The clock by the bed says 5:00 A.M. Shak-

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ing, he turns it away. Then he turns it back and looks at the date (it hadn't changed): 6/21. The numbers won't focus.

He curls up on his side, wondering at his heartbeat and his ragged breath. He catches at a dream (not a dream, no) and remembers two women. Once he was married; now he is not. He pushes that woman aside, because the vision hurts too much. The other woman he can't quite remember (has he even met her yet?). There is hurt there, too. He falls asleep, still wondering.

When he wakes, two hours later, the date still hasn't changed. He sits up, dizzy with a feeling of double vision. He rises, goes to the bathroom, brushes his teeth, and shaves, all with a sense of déjà vu that won't go away. He calls in to work, to see if there is any (he knows there isn't). They can't fire him, but they have changed his job so he works only when they need him — which isn't often. To protect his health, they say. So he won't tire himself out. He is not surprised when they tell him to stay home. The words are an echo of the day before and the day before that and the day—

He stops the train of thought that will lead to memories if he lets it. But as he tries to blank his mind, he remembers the day before, and stops cold because it is today. Then the feeling is gone again, with only an image of a face slowly turning.

He eats breakfast, forcing himself to stay nourished. He checks his calendar. There is a support-group meeting this evening. He crosses it off. There will be too many gaunt faces, too many reminders of his future. He stops that train of thought, too. He is here and now. But the long day waits patiently to draw him in, with no work to keep his thoughts in line, no place to go and no one to see who will listen without a mask of concerned pity or an act of hale and heartiness.

He reads, but he doesn't remember what. He tries to meditate as they taught him, carefully relaxing each muscle, and trying to visualize himself alive and healthy years from now. It has worked before. It has given him hope and a sense of purpose. But his hopes have died, first that his wife would live, then that he would be an Immune, one of the one-tenth of 1 percent that didn't have to fear. Then that he could lead a normal life as he died. Now his only purpose is to stay where he is, beyond his past and out of his own future.

He watches television, but the music is too loud, and the rouged faces look too much like masks (a vision of a crowded bar, faces turning toward

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him). He puts on a tape and listens to music, thinking of nothing, unfocused. Noon comes and passes.

Finally he gets dressed. He starts to clip on the bracelet, out of duty only. It's an action that could never become a habit, this donning the badge of his fear. But today he stops. If he wears it, he will be alone, no matter where he goes. He holds it against his wrist, uncertain (though he knows what he will do), and finally drops it back onto his bureau. As it falls, he has a sudden vision of four men breaking through a door, two in uniform. But that passes, too, leaving only a hint of panic and a sense of confusion that has grown through the day.

He walks out into slanting sunlight and hot streets. He realizes with a shock that it's rush hour already. Every space has a person. Faces flash by, too many and too fast to be recognized. He steps back into the doorway, made queasy by the thought of being seen. But they pass by blindly, and after a minute he finds some courage in their unseeing eyes. He realizes (remembers) that no one will notice him. He steps into the flow of traffic and lets it take him down the street, floating through the evening, letting it turn into night.

Until he comes to the neoned doorway and faces the guard who never smiles and who wants to see his wrist. He goes down the stairs, back tingling, though he knows he will not be called back. He eddies into the strange, cold, noisy crowd in the club, knowing he will find someone, but still filled with the fear he will not.

Then he sees Eve in her light at the end of the bar. He wants to go straight to her, but the space isn't empty yet, and he is still scanning the bar. He squeezes in behind the woman in white and raises his hand for the bartender, feeling the thrill of showing his wrist almost as if it were a new event. He starts to turn and remembers the police officer, but turns anyway and is surprised to see the police officer. Which brings a vision of four men breaking through a doorway, two in uniform, and the panic hits him, the vision of death waiting in a ward of other liars.

He turns and takes the glass, drinks with a shaking hand. The crowd shifts. Faces turn, grinning faces, yellow teeth and empty eyes.

All but Eve, who smiles. He flees to her pool of tinted light and the pool of laughter that changes the tension in his body and brings him back to here and now. He sees the silver earring, admires her neck and her dress. He remembers now, because he loves her already, though he

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knows it will be hours before he feels the real emotion.

He says what he remembers, even the stupid parts, letting the moments come as they will (as they have), just so he can be out of here with her to the relative calm of the street. And once there, he holds each moment as long as he can, feeling his passion grow past need to an honest desire while they talk about movies and plays and she names the animals that inhabit the people around them.

Then a clock strikes one, and she brushes her lips over his. He fights off the memory of what is to come, though he would like to remember forever their lovemaking. That memory leads to others, and he cannot allow memories, even of his future. He rides beside her in the cab, letting the musk of auburn hair hold him to the here and now.

Then they are in her little room, touching in all the ways that they know are safe, taking up the bed that takes up most of the floor, with the window open to the breeze and soft noises. He breathes in her laughter. He finds peace in the quickening pace of her stroking. He does not want to lie to her, but he cannot risk the truth, so he is careful with her, as careful as he remembers, as careful as he can be. He thinks of a hundred ways to tell her so she won't be afraid. So she won't shrink away in disgust and anger and throw him out of her life. So he won't have to fear the men who are about to come through the door.

That thought he quells as quickly as it comes, and with it all sense of choice. He lets the night go on, gives himself completely to each moment so he can live it like the first time (this is the first time). He tangles his hands in her hair and arches up to be as deeply with her as he can be, and forgets everything except his body and hers as his orgasm comes and then hers and then her kiss, stretching out the time when he wishes it would end.

But then it is over, and she is smiling and bringing the tissues. And he is still a liar and still afraid that her last kiss may have doomed her, and he still has to face the four men.

Who come breaking down the door, four men, two in uniform, Eve rising proudly to challenge them, then starting to turn with the word AIDS echoing in his mind and his eyes filled with panic, the visions of death and her smile dying now that she knows, and the panic comes and gives him power over space and time (but not death).

* * *

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DANIEL FLOATS in a cold sweat in a bed in a room he can't quite see. Light seeps in around the shades. The clock by the bed says 5:00 A.M. Shaking, he turns it away. Then he turns it back and looks at the date: 6/21. It hasn't changed. He knows for sure it hasn't changed.

He curls up on his side, wondering how many times he has turned the clock back around to see 6/21. His heart is beating wildly, his breathing ragged. He catches at a dream that is not a dream, and remembers . . . Eve. Eve light and laughing, with silver earrings coiled in her velvet hair. Eve in tinted light, Eve naming animals, Eve curled under his arm in the cab. Eve in her room, in her bed that takes up the room. Eve rising, Eve turning—

He feels the panic coming, and fights it down. He starts the memory over, Eve at the bar in her pool of light. He lies awake trying to remember only so much, trying to stop the memory just as he has stopped his life, only sooner. Still the panic leaks through. Death leaks through. What stays alive is the sense of Eve. He remembers now because of Eve. Because, over time (and God knows how many times), he has come to love her. He has entered her and loved her, each time the first, but each time knowing her better. While all she knows is a lie.

Two hours later he rises, his mind still playing the loop of the day to come. He goes to the bathroom, brushes his teeth, and shaves. The actions are the same; even the déjà vu is the same. He calls in to work; he forces himself to eat. He tries to read, tries to meditate, tries TV. There is one difference he notes in a moment of insight that breaks through the rote action: now he remembers. He anticipates. If only in his mind, he has made a change to his future.

He puts on his tapes and lets them play background to his insight. He finds a new meditation around Eve.

Finally he gets dressed. He picks up the bracelet and holds it, remembering his previous need.

I don't have to lie to her, he thinks. *I can meet her on different ground.*

The image of the four policemen begins to fade. He feels clearer, surer of himself. He feels he knows her well enough to be able to tell her the truth. He clips on the bracelet and walks out the door.

The crowd outside the doorway still shocks him, but he looks for the creatures inside them and finds comfort in the game. He goes through the

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evening as a passerby, letting each moment happen, preoccupied by what will come later, as evening turns to night and he reaches the neoned doorway.

He has planned to wait outside on the street until she comes out, but he finds himself smiling to the unsmiling man. He feels a rush of surprise even as he says, "Good evening," but he reminds himself that he has on the bracelet, and the man won't let him in.

Daniel raises his hand, showing his wrist, and feels a second shock when the man nods him through. His wrist is bare.

He walks down the stairs, back tingling, waiting to be called back. He can hardly see the steps. He tries to remember what he did with the bracelet, but he can't be sure now what future he is in.

He descends into cold. He sees Eve and finds himself at the bar, pushing in behind the woman in white. He raises his hand to call the bartender, and wonders again what happened to the bracelet. The thought distracts him, so when he turns, he is not ready still again for the sight of the police officer standing by the stairs. The panic starts, just as he remembers it did, and with all the force of a first time.

He drinks and stands uncertain, dealing with emotions that should be just memories. The crowd eddies around him. Eyes turn, staring and hollow. And there is Eve, smiling at him. This time he turns away. Only to find himself squeezing to a space at the bar.

She is there, watching him sit, almost laughing. She toasts him with her half-filled glass. "Impressive," she says. "Are you a gymnast?"

He mumbles something, desperation supplanting his panic. He looks at her hair and sees the earring, admires her dress and remembers the supple body beneath. They talk, and he buys her a drink, wondering how he can stop this, and realizing this isn't the part he wants to stop. He lets her lead him out to the street.

He savors her company, only a little distracted by the chain of events he hasn't broken. They talk about movies and plays and the creatures that inhabit the bodies around them. Then a clock strikes one, and they stop in the street and kiss gently. He calls a cab and gives his own address, then settles back to breathe in the joy of her hair.

The cab lets them out at her place. Desperation returns like a bad memory. They are in her room, touching slowly, brushing lips. She slides her dress off her shoulders, laughs, and starts to undress him.

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"Eve," he says, "You can't do this."

But she is pulling out the bed and drawing him down to touch and tangle in her hair while the breeze drifts in through the window.

Then she reaches for the table and laughs as he stares stupidly at the condoms in her hand and his.

"Eve," he says, "I have AIDS."

Then she reaches for the table and laughs, holding a condom in her hand.

"I will infect you," he says. "Please, stop now."

Then she reaches for the table, laughing, and he cries inside and lets her put them on. She mounts him, and he loves it and hates it and can't make it stop for either reason. He remembers to clamp his jaws at the end, to try to keep out her soft, probing tongue, only to feel it slide gently into his mouth, sparking a final pulse of love and despair that leaves him trembling in her arms.

He holds her still for as long as he can, wishing they could both fall asleep and wake up together in his bed next morning or on any morning past or future.

Then she starts to lift up. He holds her.

"Wait, please," he says, and he reaches down carefully and holds the condoms as he slides free of her.

She smiles and touches his cheek. "So careful," she says.

He can't reply.

"I'll get something," she says, and she brushes his lips.

He watches her go into the little bathroom, watches as she comes back to sit beside him on the bed. *Nothing,* he thinks, *there is nothing I can do to change the past.* And he realizes there has been — is still — only one thing he can do. He fights the panic already rising, trying to be ready for the next moment.

He hears the sound of feet and voices in the hall, hears the pounding fist on the door. It flies open, crashing against the wall, and the four men push into the little room. Badges flash in the dim light.

Eve rises, unashamed, and Daniel loves her. He watches her, finding strength.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demands.

Daniel hears the word AIDS. Eve starts to turn.

And this time he waits, ignoring the vision of death, remembering love.

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He waits, letting the panic pass over and through him, relinquishing his arcane power. He is desperate and afraid, but still waiting, still here and now as here and now become his future.

Her smile is gone. Her eyes are angry and sad. He sits still, letting her look at him, and wishing there were something he could say or could have said. He meets her gaze and tells her *I'm sorry* in his mind.

"I know," she says. "He told me."

"What?" the officer says. Daniel is just as confused.

"He told me," she says again. "I know he has AIDS."

She walks past Daniel, not looking at him now, and takes a robe from a hook by the bed. The police hesitate behind her, frustration plain in their faces. It changes to anger.

"You realize that's a felony?" the first one says. Eve adjusts the robe, ignoring him. "Knowingly having sex with an infected person is a crime, lady. I'm going to have to take you in with him."

"I'm an Immune," Eve says, and Daniel reels one more time. Those words are not among any of the futures he imagined. The police are stunned as well.

"Look, lady . . . ," one starts.

But Eve opens her purse and takes out a bracelet. She holds it out. The leader steps forward, eyeing her suspiciously. He looks and swears under his breath.

"All right," he says, "But he comes with us."

"Why?" she demands. "I said he told me."

The officer turns to Daniel, who suddenly remembers he is naked.

"Got your bracelet?" the man asks.

Daniel shakes his head and manages to say, "No."

"Then I gotta book you. Get dressed."

They watch as he does, and Eve goes into the bathroom, leaving him more exposed and alone than he has felt in his life.

But Eve comes out dressed and goes with him to the station. She sits beside him while they wait on the hard benches, gets him coffee, repeats the lie that he told her. But she doesn't speak to him, and he spends the time confused, afraid to say something himself.

Finally they are outside on the street. Hazy dawn streaks the sidewalk. It's 5:00 A.M., but it's 6/22.

"Thank you," Daniel says.

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She doesn't look at him. "The laws are inhuman," she says. "Forget it."

"I won't forget it," he tells her, but she doesn't respond, and he says, "I'm sorry. I tried to tell you."

"You did?" She looks at him finally, but she is neither smiling nor gentle.

"No," he admits. "Not the first time. Only later."

"What?" She is puzzled. He knows he can't explain.

"I was careful," he says. "You weren't in any danger until you kissed me at the end."

"I know the odds," she says. Then her eyes soften. "You were careful. I was never in danger anyway."

"Why did you hide it?" He finally asks the question that has worried at him most since he first heard her say *Immune.*

"It wasn't important," she says.

"Of course it was important," he says. He tries to tell her why, but all he can say is, "We didn't have to use condoms."

"Is that all it means?" She glares at him now. "What do you feel about me?" she asks him. "I'm an Immune. What does that mean to you?"

Daniel stops. The question surprises him, and surprises him more when he realizes the bitter envy that lies just beyond the edge of his regard. She is immune. She will never have to face his wasting death. She can lie with anyone she likes, walk into any club. She can kiss.

"You see?" she says, watching his face. "You can't help despise me."

And he does see, that she must live with envy, as he must live with fear and they both must live with hate.

"I also love you," he says.

She laughs, but it is short and bitter.

"I do," he says, "and I want to see you again."

Her face softens, but she shakes her head.

"I haven't loved anyone for over a year," he tells her. "Do you know what that's like?"

"Daniel," she says, "Do you want me to have to watch you die? Do you know what that's like?"

Sudden memories fill him, and he has no power to stop them. He has taken back his future, and with it his past. He remembers love and pain and the death of his wife. He remembers, and he knows what it would be like for her. It is too much to ask.

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He realizes that she is watching his face intently. He has no idea how long he has been standing there facing his past. He wonders what animal she sees inside him. He turns away and starts to leave.

But Eve takes his hand. She brushes his lips once with her own, and then lets go.

"Come to me when you need to," she says.

"No," he tells her.

"Yes," she says. "I'll give what I can. I don't know how much that is. No promises. Just what I can."

Then she goes. Daniel watches as the crowd grows between them, till he loses sight of her behind a burly, bearish man in working clothes. He doesn't know if he will go to her or not. Either would be an act of love, and right now he cannot safely choose between them. But he can't imagine a future without her.

"I just want to use your time machine to go back to last Thursday to see if I can remember where I left my glasses."

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Here is an absorbing piece of science fiction about an expedition to an odd world called Veloz, where the local life-forms are shaggy, roundheaded things named Shies. They are treated as pets until they are discovered to be sitting on a mountain of profits . . .

BIG FAR NOW

By Bruce Holland Rogers

VELOZ WAS A QUIRKY world, and its strangeness should have put all of us on edge, made us think in different ways. There was so much about the place that we hadn't been able to explain. For instance, the planet's sun was an F5 star, nearly double the mass of Sol and more than five times as bright. The planet spun in a fast, tight orbit, and because of the planet's proximity to its sun and the sun's luminosity, the surface radiation should have been sizzling.

It was Earth-like.

We didn't know why. We had theories about atmospheric screening, but none of our speculations ever matched our data.

There was more. The planet was small, but incredibly dense. The surface gravity was close to that on Earth, and the planet had retained a moist, nitrogen/oxygen atmosphere. It supported abundant life, though not quite what colonists had encountered on other living planets. The

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planet's life was distributed uniformly over its surface, where the temperature was also virtually uniform, even at the poles, and rain fell predictably every morning from skies that were never completely clear. There was one type of ecological community. One. Land on any part of Veloz, and you'd see the same dense forest and frenetic animals you'd see anywhere else on the planet. Always, the same huge towertrees and domewood. Always, the same fast, small predators and prey that looked vaguely like mammals. Lightning dogs and Shies.

There was more about the place that was strange, that should have set us to thinking: the canisters I had discovered, for instance, or Joanna's observations about how different some populations of Shies were from others. And then there was the composition of one particular mountain. It was all odd enough that we should have slowed down there, on that planet named for speed, and thought things out more deliberately.

I say *we*, but I really mean *I*.

Joanna says I shouldn't blame myself for what happened, even though she recently called me a coward. She says there was a kind of momentum that got started with the way the expedition was funded, and that I couldn't have made a real difference by taking a stand with her, getting my own legs shot out from under me. But I do blame myself. The faces of 138 men and women slip past me every night, right after the sleeping pill. And how many Shies died? And how far away did someone feel their agony as they suffocated and burned?

As I say, we should have thought things through, but we didn't. Veloz was our chance to make new lives for ourselves, to turn a profit for our charter sponsors and earn ourselves the right to stay on the planet, breathing clean air and living with a little elbow room. After the *Kepler* touched down and we stood for the first time on our new world, Governor Meeker never stopped reminding us of what would happen if we failed. None of us wanted to go back to Earth. We cleared an area in the forest around the *Kepler*, built shelters from local materials, and then got right to work trying to find a way to turn a profit. We worked all out, fullthrot.

There were two main development teams: my team of physicists and planetary geologists, checking into the composition of the planet, and Susan Suhl's group, investigating the planet's biology. I was looking for minerals; she was looking for pharmaceuticals. Susan was our main hope. As it turned out, I had more luck than she did, but now I'm getting ahead of myself.

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Not everyone followed such obvious paths to profitability. We were all free to investigate whatever we wanted to, since a good business idea could come from anywhere. So Joanna Carpaccio, one of our psychologists, went into the forest to study the Shies.

Now, Joanna and I were friends. A little more than friends, in fact. We had shared quarters during the yearlong hyperspace jump from home, taking from one another the sort of consolation that only such sleeping arrangements can make possible. It was sort of a custom of deep-space travel. And then on landing, according to custom, we dissolved the arrangement. Actually, we could have broken with customs and stayed together; some couples did. But Joanna thought that we weren't quite right for each other.

"You're so hard-nosed, David," she told me. "I think in softer edges, more expansively, more speculatively. We just don't see things in the same way. You're a little like Meeker."

That last remark would have sounded like a compliment to me if I hadn't known what Joanna thought of our governor. Meeker was a can-do man, my type of guy. In her own words, Joanna thought Meeker was "shallow and manipulative."

We'd been good traveling companions, she said, but the colony was for the rest of our lives, and we didn't click in that way. So, to save face, I agreed in a hard-nosed, mature-sounding way, and we parted company.

Then I didn't sleep well for weeks. I paired, from time to time, with Susan Suhl or Ofra Shioshita, but I kept thinking of Joanna, of her hair that was black as the space between the stars, and was so very cool and soft between my fingers. When I was with Susan or Ofra or one of the others, part of me was someplace else, someplace with Joanna.

So, as I said, Joanna went into the forest to study the Shies, though I suspected she went more because she liked the Shies than because she imagined that we could make profitable use of them.

At any rate, *I* considered the Shies to be pretty useless, and almost everyone shared my view. Once or twice, someone or other had thought about catching a Shy as a pet. On the surface of it, it wasn't a bad idea. Shies are cute, big-eyed, roundheaded little things. Looking at one once, I thought of an illustration of puppies and kittens and human babies in my college psychology microtext. We tend to think of roundheaded things, like baby animals, as adorable. It's an innate response. A shaggy little Shy

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triggers that same reflex, and Shies were also appealing because of their habit of mimicking speech. Call to one a few times, and it would call back to you, like a parrot. They might indeed make good pets. But try and catch one. Our stun-dart drugs either didn't work at all or else killed them, and you sure couldn't get close enough to one to catch it by hand.

Lightning dogs, on the other hand, didn't have much trouble at all with catching Shies. Hunting in tree-climbing packs, the "dogs" were adept at cornering their agile prey and closing on them in a circle of powerful jaws. Shies put up quite a racket when they were surrounded, chattering and howling, but it never did them any good from what I had seen.

The lightning dogs worried us when we first saw them hunting. Like Shies, they often moved faster than the eye could follow, and almost all of us had bad memories of real dog packs in the crumbling cities of Earth. But the lightning dogs seemed hardly to notice us. We decided that in such a uniform environment, they already knew what prey looked like. We didn't fit the menu, so they ignored us.

So Joanna took to the forest to study the Shies, and I didn't see her much. I was busy sampling and setting up my remote mineral survey. From time to time, though, she would come back to camp with stories about how she had the Shies eating towerfruit out of her hands, and I'd invite her to my tent and ask her questions about the Shies without really listening to her answers, but thinking instead of new questions, anything to keep her talking to me. I think I convinced her that I thought the Shies were fascinating.

And then, for a little while, they *were* fascinating. Joanna came back with audio samples of Shies talking. *Talking.*

It created a bit of a stir for all of us. The most intelligent animals encountered so far in human space travel were merely what we had imagined Shies were, namely, about as smart as dogs. But the Shies in the tapes were definitely talking.

"Mowza want fruit?" asked Joanna's voice on a typical tape.

"Mowza want, yes. Give Mowza, give Mowza," answered the scratchy, childish voice of one of Joanna's subjects.

For about a week, everyone was delighted. A life-form smart enough for speech! But our excitement died down sooner than you'd expect. From Joanna's own reports, we gathered that the Shies didn't really have a language of their own, that they had learned to speak chiefly as a way to earn

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the fruit she had gathered. They had generally poor memories and could learn only a small vocabulary. They didn't really have a culture, not in any sense we could recognize. It looked as though we hadn't yet discovered a new consciousness with which to compare our own, at least not one that we could converse with freely. Since most of us still had a lot of work to do just trying to determine how we could earn the right to stay on this planet, the talking Shies were soon no big deal to anyone but Joanna, who stayed in the field with them more and more and left me more and more alone.

My own crew created another stir for a time when we found two hemispheres like the halves of some spherical canister buried four feet below the surface in a survey field. The things were corroded iron and very brittle. We thought at first that they must be artifacts. Then we found more, and they were so uniformly featureless — no hinges or clasps or anything to show that they were ever attached to one another — and there was so much other iron evident in that area, that we started to ask ourselves whether they could be naturally occurring, and the stir about our "archaeological" find soon died down.

About this time I started a part of my own work that could basically run itself. My crew and I had taken some surface mineral samples to calibrate my survey satellite, and now all we had to do was turn the thing on for a while and let the computers on board the *Kepler* record and analyze the data that came in as the satellite made repeated passes over all of Veloz. In other words, we had time on our hands, and I started to look for something to do. So I climbed domewoods.

I haven't said much about the trees on Veloz, but they were tremendous. From the enormous towertrees to spindlelegs and walking arches, the forest was a maze of trunks. But the most spectacular tree was one without a trunk. Or maybe you could say the domewood was nothing *but* trunk.

Domewoods were rare, probably because they had a hard time starting on the low light of the forest floor. They began as little red knobs springing up through the black soil. If they happened to start in a spot with enough light, they would begin to spread out in all directions like a stain, except that they grew in thickness as well. They grew slowly, but irresistibly, and at their edges they knocked over other trees. Once they got going, they could grow to enormous proportions. Not far from our camp, there was

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one that was over a kilometer across. Its outer edges ran up like red wooden cliffs from the forest floor.

We had used the translucent inner bark of the domewood for construction. It dried into tough, glassy plates. The red outer bark was photosynthetic.

On my third day with little to do, I had one of my metallurgists make me some long steel spikes, and I took a heavy bag of them into the forest with me. I hammered in foot- and handholds and climbed, adding new holds as I needed them, until I could walk upright on the gradually decreasing slope.

It was wonderful, as I walked up toward the summit of the trees, to see the forest canopy spreading out beneath me. It was the first such view I had had of Veloz. After all, even though Mount Meeker rose from the forest floor near our camp, it was covered with trees. As far as I knew, I was the only person who had thought of climbing a domewood to get a look around. I was busy congratulating myself, when someone appeared over the horizon of the tree. Her back was to me as she stood looking out over the green expanse. It was Joanna.

Suddenly I could feel the weight of my boots crushing the domewood bark, and I felt my throat pulsing, could almost hear my heartbeat. When I was a little closer, I said, "Hi, Jo."

She started and turned. "David!" she said. She sounded like she really was happy to see me.

I motioned toward the canopy below us and at the domewood under our feet. "I thought I was the first."

She laughed. "I've been coming up here since the first time I came out chasing Shies."

"How do you get up?"

"There's a sloping section on the other side. I can walk up." She smiled. "I suppose you have a more technical approach."

I took out one of the spikes and showed it to her. She laughed.

"So how are your little shaggy friends?"

"Good," she said. "I'm getting more and more impressed with them."

"Oh?"

"There's more to them than I thought," she said. "They have something like a religion."

I nodded, but I wasn't really hearing what she was saying. I was trying

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to think of what I could say that would bring her back to me. Everything I thought of sounded trite and abrupt.

"Or maybe not exactly a religion," she went on. "It's nothing systematic, nothing very abstract. But they have a sense of the sacred. It's fascinating."

I nodded.

"And there seem to be two distinct groups of Shies in the area where I'm camped. There are some surprising differences between them. For example, my Shies, the ones I talk to, don't have any trouble with lightning dogs. The dogs ignore them, just like they ignore us. The other day I saw a lightning dog jump over one of the Shies I talk to in order to chase a Shy from the other group."

"Interesting," I said. We all wore the same blue work togs on Veloz, colonial issue. They weren't exactly carefully tailored, but Joanna made hers look pretty good.

"And the other Shies won't talk. They won't get close to me. I can't help feeling sometimes that I'm seeing two different species. Ferals and talkers. Animals in one group, and in the other. . . . In the other, people. I get the strangest feeling when I talk to some of my Shies, that they have submerged intelligence, powers of thought that are something like ours, only sleeping. And sometimes they say the strangest things to me, like they're trying to tell me something very elaborate with the small vocabulary they've learned."

"Interesting," I said again. And that was all I said. A hundred days ago, on the ship, we had been intimate, day after ship's day, and now my tongue was tied.

"How are you, David? How's your own investigation coming?"

"Oh," I said, thinking. You're blowing this, David. "It's fine. Nothing spectacular. Nothing unexpected."

"Something I like about the Shies," she said, "is that a lot of what I encounter is unexpected. I'm really having a lot of fun."

"Learning anything useful?" Right after I said it, I realized how it sounded.

She turned away, and her shoulders tensed. "Not everything of value turns a profit."

"That's not what I meant," I said, but now that I had started this, it was like something that I couldn't stop. "I've just been thinking a lot lately in terms of whether the colony is going to succeed or not. My surveys haven't

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shown any special mineral wealth. I'm worried. It's been on my mind."

"Yes," she said. "It would be. We're in this strange and beautiful place, and all you think about is turning a profit."

"That's not all I think about," I said. "I'm here, right? You think I climbed up here to find a way to make money?"

She turned toward me, and her face lost some of its tension, but what she said was, "I don't know."

"Jo, I'm here to make a new start, to find a new way to live." I stepped closer and put an arm on her shoulder. "I want to make enough money to earn the right to stay here. And then I want to leave all of that behind. I want life here to be different."

She turned around, and I stood behind her, looking out over the tops of the trees. Her hair smelled like rain. Finally she said, "Be getting dark soon." And she walked away toward the far end of the domewood without looking back.

That was the last I saw of her until after my crew made the strike in rare metals.

It all happened so quickly. We had been getting computer reports day after day with numbing monotony. There was nothing exciting, nothing hopeful in the mineral profile of the planet's surface. We were a little glum, because the word was out from Susan Suhl's group that the biota of Veloz wasn't going to make us rich anytime soon, and so it was more important than ever that we find an exploitable mineral deposit. But we couldn't just will a promising deposit into existence, and the survey was almost complete.

Then one afternoon, while my chief assistant, Fom Mah, and I played chess and only half-listened to the computer's voice, the machine started to sing out the mineral profile for the region under Mount Meeker:

". . . Gallium, point-oh-five. . . ."

Had the computer said Gallium? I got up to check the screen.

". . . . Mercury, point-oh-seven. . . ."

Mercury on Veloz? In that high a concentration?

". . . Chromium, two-point-six. . . ."

Chromium! Now there was something we could use!

". . . Platinum, point-oh-nine. . . ."

The sensors were malfunctioning. That had to be it. As more unlikely metal concentrations kept coming from the computer's voice, we started

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to order a new test for another nearby region, one that we were sure of, to recalibrate the satellite. We transmitted a signal that reset the satellite orbit so that it would pass over Mount Meeker again.

We played chess and waited nearly three hours for the next satellite pass. It had to be a calibration slip, I thought, but I also thought that maybe, just maybe the readings were accurate. Then we heard the computer's bell-like voice again: "Sector Aleph Aleph, two by forty-seven, second reading. . . . Gallium, point-oh-five. . . . Mercury, point-oh-seven. . . . Chromium, two-point-six. . . ." One metal after another, on and on.

I looked at Fom. He looked at me. It didn't make a lot of geochemical sense, but there it was. We started to laugh. The colony was rich!

News spread fast. Technically, we were supposed to hold a meeting of all colonists to determine what course of economic development the colony would take once all of us had finished our research, but the minerals report made it seem like only one choice was possible, even before we had heard from Suhl or the others.

Suddenly we were refitting equipment for mining and building a road to Mount Meeker. It just started happening, and everyone seemed relieved.

Everyone, that is, except Joanna.

She burst into my hut out of the rain one morning, soaked and mad. "What the hell do you people think you're doing?" she demanded.

I managed to say something impressive like, "Huh?"

She was so angry, it took her a moment to find her words. "I come back from the Shies to get resupplied," she said at last, "and on my way, I hear particle cutters shrieking."

Shrieking was a good word for it. The cutters used sound to maintain a vacuum around the particle beam. We had all been wincing at that high-pitched peal since the road clearing had begun just outside the camp. Even at a distance, the sound was grating.

"So just outside of camp, I run into a road-clearing operation. I ask around, and I find out the colony's going to mine Mount Meeker." She shook her head, raining droplets of water. "Mount Meeker!" She glowered at me. "The road crew said it was on your recommendation!"

"Joanna, slow down a little," I said.

"You want me to slow down? Slow down your damn road crew, then. They're felling trees with particle cutters like there's some kind of race to

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get to the mountain. We have five *years* to make a profit, David. Five years!"

"Would you please tell me why this is such a big deal?" I said.

"I'd have told everyone, if you had given me a chance. Why didn't someone come get me for the governance meeting?"

I put up my hands. "Because there hasn't been any governance meeting, Jo."

It was like I had pulled the plug on her. Her eyes went blank, and she said, "No meeting?"

"No."

"So it's not decided?"

I shrugged. "Everyone got a little excited. I guess we forgot about the formality."

"Formality!" Her eyes flashed again. "You wait here, David Balas. I'm going to want a word with you."

"Where are you going?" I said.

"To Meeker. He's going to call that meeting for tomorrow if he knows what's good for him. Don't even breathe until I get back, David. Don't even breathe."

If I did breathe, it was to offer thanks that I had never seen her quite so furious before.

WHEN JOANNA came back to my hut, she was still agitated, but not as angry. I offered her a drink.

"Thanks," she said. She held it up to the light. "What is it?"

"Rum," I said.

She sniffed it. "Ethyl alcohol?"

I nodded.

She arched her brow. "I would never have suspected you of drug addiction."

"I'm not addicted," I said. "I just have a little now and then, at special moments."

"Still," she said, "you took a big risk bringing a controlled substance on a colonial voyage."

"It's not a death-penalty drug. I'd spend a few nights in the brig if they caught me with it." I took a sip. It warmed my belly. I had been drinking

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since shortly after Joanna had stormed out, so my belly was pretty nicely warmed. I laughed at the thought.

"What?" Joanna said.

"Nothing." I patted the bottle. "Before we shipped out, I thought I might need this."

"So you are addicted."

"No. I don't mean it that way. I mean, I thought we might have been going someplace as bad as Earth, or worse. In that case I'd want to get good and drunk."

"What could be worse than Earth?" Joanna took a sip. "It does taste good."

"I think so."

"So are you drinking because Veloz disappoints you?"

I shook my head. "I love it here," I said. "I don't want to go back."

"So why are you drinking?"

"I've been sitting here thinking about your tirade of an hour ago." I took a swallow of rum. "I figure you've got something to say about Mount Meeker, something you know that means it isn't what we think it is, or that means we can't mine it."

"Not can't," she said. "Mustn't."

"Whatever," I said, tossing back the rest of the rum. "From what I've heard from Suhl and her people, mining is our best hope for making this colony pay off its charter."

"Best," said Joanna, "but not only."

"You've got a better idea?" I said.

She shook her head.

"So break the news to me, Joanna. Why can't we mine Mount Meeker?"

"I can't," she said. "It would take time and convincing, and I have to go back into the forest to try to do a different kind of convincing tonight."

"What are you talking about?"

"You'll see tomorrow. But before then, I have a favor to ask you. Something more than a favor, really."

I gestured expansively. "I'm all yours," I said. I felt the heat of the alcohol in my face. "What do you want me to do?"

"When we met on top of the domewood, you said you wanted life to be different."

I nodded.

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"I do, too. I don't want us to make the kinds of mistakes here that people made on Earth."

I nodded again. My head felt a little loose on my neck.

"We were about to make a big mistake," Joanna said.

"Right. Tell me."

"Tomorrow. But right now I want to know how serious you were about making things different here."

"Dead serious. One hundred percent. Fullthrot." I'd have told her whatever I thought she wanted to hear. Oh Jojojojo, take me back, I thought. Take me into your arms again.

"Then tomorrow help me out," she said.

I nodded.

"I'm going to make a presentation. I'm going to try to get the colony to approve a delay in the mining, a delay of two years, say, to investigate other possibilities."

"Two years." I must have been glassy-eyed, but I guess if you've never seen someone drunk before, you don't notice the symptoms much. Anyway, Joanna didn't say anything if she did notice.

"David, I don't know if I'm going to be convincing, but I'm going to need your support. If you back me up, any way you can, it will mean a lot. You're the geology expert. If you can express some doubt about the project and support me a little, it's bound to throw votes my way. Please." Her mouth was red and wet.

I nodded. "Sure."

"Even if you find my argument unconvincing. Please, David. I'm dealing with something that's part gut feeling here. That's not going to be enough to convince the colony."

"You got it, Jo. Whatever you want. Fullthrot. Your eyes are pretty, you know?"

She gave me a sisterly hug. It was worse than no hug at all. "Thanks, David," she said. "See you tomorrow."

Then it was just me and the bottle.

The meeting was in the Glass House, Meeker's administrative headquarters and the one building big enough to hold everyone. We had built the frame out of black towertree lumber, and paneled most of the exterior walls with the translucent inner bark of a domewood.

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My head was pounding. I wished we had built the Glass House out of something opaque. The light felt like knife blades at the back of my eyes.

I sat there listening to people talk as they filed in. A few people were a little put off about having the meeting. After all, what was there to decide? But most of them didn't seem to mind.

The governor came in with the three co-governors. Meeker was wearing his colonial uniform, which he rarely did. The others hadn't bothered, and wore the same blue togs as the rest of us. Meeker's sidearm, an old projectile weapon, looked strangely out of place in its holster, a ceremonial relic of another century.

I noted that even Captain Rhamal had come for this. He and his crew seldom left the *Kepler*, as though they liked living in that tin can all the time.

Suddenly the buzz of conversation stopped. Everyone was turning toward the door. I turned.

There in the doorway stood Joanna. Beside her, reaching its furry hand to hers, was a Shy. The animal was shaking and grinning like a madman. Joanna said a few soft words to it, and the Shy walked into the room with her.

Nobody said anything as Joanna helped the Shy to climb into a seat near the front of the room. It looked around the room at us, from face to face, grinning so hard I thought its lips would split. Someone — Susan Suhl, I think — had told me that Shies grinned when they were anxious.

Joanna looked at me as if to say, *You still with me on this?* My tongue felt like it was pasted to the roof of my mouth. I avoided her gaze.

"Well," Meeker said. He waited for us to look at him. "Well. I don't mind telling you that this meeting is largely a formality." He looked at Joanna. "But we are technically required to assemble and vote on an economic plan for the colony, so here we are."

The Shy beside Joanna yawned and scratched and went right on grinning. The morning rain started to patter on the roof.

"As far as I know," the governor continued, "there is only one verified source for paying off our charter debt. If we fail to pay it off, I don't have to tell you what it will mean."

It meant Earth. It meant being dirty and hungry and crowded all the time. It meant eating synthmeals when you could get them, breathing through catalyzers, and not going outside without a UV screen. It meant

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living every day with the violence that an overcrowded, dying planet bred. Worst of all, for most of us, it meant boredom.

"What about the planet's biota?" Joanna said. "This is an unusually rich planet, isn't it?"

Meeker said, "Dr. Suhl?"

Susan Suhl stood up. "Veloz is unusual, but hardly rich," she said. I wished the rain weren't so loud on the roof. "The life-forms are chemically dissimilar from us. Bizarre, actually, compared to other planets. Though the plants and animals here are made of elements in roughly the same proportion as life on Earth, many of the basic chemical structures are not analogous. We may eventually isolate some useful compounds, but on Veloz we will first have to relearn our basic biochemistry. It's going to take time, and we may come up empty, especially since we don't have many species to work with. So far, it appears there are only about five hundred different species on the planet. That may sound like a lot, but it includes insect analogues and microorganisms."

Joanna's Shy started to sway from side to side now, and it was eyeing the door. Joanna put her hand on its head. It clutched her fingers and stopped swaying.

"How long do you think it might take," she said, "to find something valuable?"

Suhl shook her head. "No way of knowing."

"No way of knowing. But you aren't up to the challenge, are you, Dr. Suhl?"

Suhl blinked. "Pardon?"

Joanna looked around the room. "Our first estimates were that this colony could pay its way through biological discoveries. Now things look tough, and the chief biologist wants to bail out."

Meeker said, "Carpaccio, you're out of line!"

The Shy jumped at the sound of the man's voice. Joanna stroked the fuzzy head. "Sorry," she said. She looked at Suhl. "I do apologize. I'm just trying to establish that the biological avenue of research hasn't been exhausted yet. Has it, Susan?"

Suhl shook her head. "Not by any means."

"Thank you," Joanna said. "And I do apologize. I was out of line."

Suhl smiled a little warily and sat down.

"Well," said Meeker, "the point is that the biological approach is un-

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certain, wherease we have a proven source of profit in the research Dr. Balas has done. Balas?"

My tongue was thick. I wasn't sure I could move it.

"Balas," said Meeker impatiently, "report."

"I think," I said, feeling the words fall like marbles from my mouth. "I think everyone knows what I found."

"Yes," said Meeker, "but we haven't had it officially yet, have we? Report, mister!"

What an officious ass, I thought.

"All right." I cleared my throat, but it still felt like it was stuffed with cotton. "Based on my satellite survey, Veloz is mostly unpromising for mining. The remote scan showed that for a depth of two kilometers, the range of my sensors, the planet is composed chiefly of silicates and aluminum ores. There's a iron-nickel layer underneath that is in evidence at some point on or near the surface. Under that, who knows what makes this little ball so massive?" I looked at Meeker. "Could someone get me some water?"

"Just finish," Meeker said.

I cleared my throat again. "The point is that the elements that are rare in our home system are present in traces too small to be worth the expense of export. So overall, this is a poor planet for mining." I looked at Joanna. "Except for Mount Meeker." The Shy was watching me with its dark, round eyes. How much did it understand of what was going on?

"Sky Mountain," Joanna said.

"Pardon?"

"Sky Mountain. The proper name, the Shy name, is Sky Mountain."

A couple of people chuckled.

"O.K.," I said. "Sky Mountain. Anyway, it's an anomaly. Under a layer of unremarkable silicates, my subsurface survey revealed a tremendous collection of metals there: gallium, mercury, chromium. . . ."

It really is an anomaly, I thought. What's all this stuff doing lumped together like that? I rubbed my temples.

"Dr. Balas?"

I looked up at Meeker.

I rifled through my notes. My hand was shaking ever so slightly. Rum was illegal for good reasons.

"Gold," I read from the sheet I was looking for, "and silver, tin, zinc,

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thallium, manganese, germanium, cobalt, titanium. A few others in smaller concentrations. They're not all rare back home, but some of them are. And we have them in sufficient quantities to turn a large profit very quickly."

"I like that phrase," Meeker said: "'large profit very quickly.'"

About half the people in the room laughed.

"How certain are you," Joanna said, "that the metals are there?"

"Absolutely certain. We double-checked our readings, and we repeated them again two days ago to be absolutely sure. The goods are down there. We just have to get them out."

"And how long would we have to work, probably, to get the metals out, refine them, and start them on their way home?"

"A year," I said. There was a happy murmur in the room. "Maybe a year and a half."

"Then let's wait," Joanna said.

The murmur stopped.

"Wait?" said Meeker.

Joanna nodded. "Let's give Dr. Suhl and the others a chance to find an alternative resource."

The murmur picked up again. "But what on earth for?" Meeker said above the voices.

The Shy swayed under Joanna's hand. "For the sake of the Shies," Joanna said.

"I don't get it," I said.

Joanna shot me a glance that said, *You're supposed to be on my side.*

"I'd like Mowza to help me explain," Joanna said.

Then a small, scratchy voice said, "Pacho, Mowza talk now?"

And all fell silent. We had heard Shies speak, but on Joanna's audio chips, never live and in person like this.

"Everyone," Joanna said, "this is Mowza. I hope you'll all appreciate what an act of will it has been for him to come into an open place like this, to be around so many Bigs, as he calls us." Chuckles. "But he has an important message to share, and he knows it.

"O.K.," she said to the creature. "Mowza talk now with Carpaccio."

The creature grinned at us.

"Who these?" Joanna said, indicating us.

"Big. Far far, Pacho."

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"Yes. Big people from far away."

"Far far. Longtime."

"Yes, it took us a long time to get here. Mowza, tell us about Sky Mountain."

The Shy sniffed the air. "Sky," he said. "Mountain." He spread his fuzzy arms. "All."

"Sky Mountain is important?"

"Sky. Mountain. All."

"Mowza, why is Sky Mountain important?"

"Sky Mountain not, Mowza not. Sky Mountain not, light dog not. Sky Mountain not, tree not, fruit not."

"Everything depends on Sky Mountain?"

The Shy scratched itself. "All."

"O.K.," Joanna said. "Thank you, Mowza."

The Shy tugged at her hand. It was like the gesture of an impatient child, and people laughed again. Mowza grinned at the sound and hunched his shoulders. Then he said, "Mowza talk now."

"Yes, you did," Joanna said, looking around at us to see what we had made of the presentation.

"Mowza talk now!" Mowza tugged hard at her hand.

"Talk more?" Joanna said.

"Talk now!" The face looked as serious as it could with those round, liquid eyes.

"O.K.," Joanna said. "What else?"

"Sky Mountain not," the Shy said. "Mowza go far far." The Shy curled up at her feet. "Far far," it said from the floor of the Glass House. Then Mowza stood up. "Pacho close now, close now." He frowned. He looked at the rest of us like he knew he was having trouble getting his message across. "Big, close now, close now." Then he put his paws on his chest. "Mowza close now, far now. Mowza close now, big far now." What was it like, I wondered, inside that fuzzy body? How did things look to him, seeing through those big, round eyes?

Joanna frowned, and Mowza took her hand again. "Mowza go," he said, and he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he looked like a man waking from a nightmare to find the ghosts of his dream, still standing in his bedroom. He looked at us, then blinked, and I don't think that what I saw in his face was anything less than terror. Suddenly he was already half-

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way to the door. He paused for half a heartbeat in the doorway to look back at Joanna, and then he was gone. The Shy's usual speed seemed all the more astonishing after we had seen it sitting in the room with us, slowed down to something like our own pace. It must have indeed been an act of will for the animal to sit so still.

I remember what Joanna had said on the domewood about the two kinds of Shies, the ferals and the talkers. Now I knew what she was talking about, but I had just seen it in one creature. When he had been talking, mowza had been like a person. And then, as though someone had thrown a switch, he turned into a wild animal that was horrified to find itself in an enclosed area with so many strange creatures. I looked at the people sitting around me. I knew exactly how he felt.

Meeker shifted in his seat. "Interesting little show, Dr. *Pacho*."

Laughter.

For once, Meeker did seem manipulative to me. He was belittling her before we even knew what this was about. Joanna rolled with it nicely, though, giving Meeker a curt stage bow.

"And now for the exegesis," Joanna said.

"The what?"

Joanna smiled. "We've just heard a religious promulgation from my friend. Now for the explanation." She looked around at us. No one was laughing. We all wanted to hear this.

Meeker said, "I thought you had been telling everyone that the Shies hadn't developed to the level of culture, of social organization."

"They haven't. Not to any degree that we'd recognize as such. Actually, I'm not talking about religion; I'm talking about protoreligion, about a primitive sense of the sacred." Joanne folded her arms. "Sky Mountain is sacred to the Shies."

Murmurs around the room.

Meeker rapped on the table with his knuckles. I could see he regretted not having a gavel.

"Hold on," he said when he had our attention. "Dr. Carpaccio, I don't believe I heard a word of religion in your little animal's speech."

"I don't think 'animal' is quite the right term to apply to a Shy," Joanna said. "And you heard the whole of Shy cosmology just now. 'Sky Mountain all,' Mowza told us. Sky Mountain is everything, a totemic god. He told us that if Sky Mountain ceases to exist, then so will he and the lightning dogs

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nd everything else alive. If the Mountain is gone, he'll curl up and go far far. That's how the Shies talk about death."

"What was all that business about Mowza close now, far now?" I asked.

"I don't know," Joanna said. "He's been telling me all of that for several weeks, but I can't make sense of it. It seems like he's saying that the other bigs and I are close all the time, but that he is close sometimes and far away sometimes, or that he is close and far away at the same time. I know it doesn't make sense. I've been spending a lot of time trying to figure it out. Mowza keeps telling me about it over and over. It's as though he understands a concept that's more elaborate than he knows how to express."

"How about that bit about, 'Mowza close now, big far now?" I said. "We're in the same room with him, but he says that he's close and we're far?"

Joanna shrugged. "Maybe it has nothing to do with distance. Mowza makes analogies. He can't remember the word for 'fist,' so he says 'fruit' instead, I guess because they're the same size and shape. So he might not mean 'near' or 'far' at all. I wish he could learn a more elaborate vocabulary, but Shies top out at about a hundred words."

"These little guys are smarter than you first thought," I said.

"Yes," Joanna said. "Mowza may have a limited vocabulary, but I think that he managed to express the thought that Sky Mountain is at the heart of Shy belief. Mining the mountain would be like digging for gold under a cathedral."

Murmurs again, and Meeker rapped once more on the table. "Dr. Carpaccio," he said, "are you seriously asking us to jeopardize the success of this colony for the sake of a little monkey prophet?"

Laughter again. Joanna took it well.

"Not jeopardize. Delay." She gestured like a lawyer with her hands. "Look," she said, "we all left Earth because the place is a mess. It's a mess because we didn't respect it, and we didn't respect those who *did* respect it. If we had thought of the planet as something sacred, we might have taken better care of it."

Meeker nodded, "Yes," he said, "we've learned that lesson. All of the colonies have environmental protocols to follow."

"For the protection of the biota," Joanna said. "Not for the good of any intelligent species we happen to encounter. There isn't a protocol for that."

"What's this about?" Meeker said. "You want to protect the religious beliefs of some talking animals?"

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Not everyone laughed at that one. I didn't.

"I want to try," Joanna said. "I want us to delay mining the mountain until we've exhausted our other options. Or for just two years, say, out of respect to our Shy neighbors."

Now everybody was talking. "Two years?" someone near me was saying. "But if we mine now, we can be free and clear in a year."

"I don't know," I heard from someone else. "It sounds reasonable to me."

Meeker was rapping on the table again, and then he pounded with his fist. "Attention!" he demanded. He stood up. "Attention!"

The conversation petered out.

"People," he said, "I don't know about you, but I don't want to go home. Some nights I can't sleep because I'm worried, worried about the future of this colony."

There were murmurs of agreement.

"Now, we know we have a chance to end our anxieties. We can dig for gold and gallium in Mount Meeker. But frankly, I won't start sleeping well until the first shipment of metal is receipted for and on its way home. It's all very good to say we can wait two years, but while the stuff is still in the ground, I'm going to have nightmares thinking that we'll wait until the last minute, dig into the mountain, and find out that Dr. Balas and his team were wrong."

"Balas," said someone in the crowd behind me, "how sure are you that the stuff is down there?"

I had forgotten my headache. Now it pounded back into my temples. "It's down there."

I looked at Meeker, my can-do man. Bastard. All Joanna wanted was a little delay.

"The readings are right. My team has triple-checked them." I turned around. "I recommend delay. It can't hurt." I looked at Susan. "Dr. Suhl?"

"Damn it, I'm chairing this meeting," Meeker said.

Suhl ignored him. "I'm willing to give it a try," she said. "One discovery of the right kind could be tremendously profitable. Who knows?"

"Could be. Might be. Maybe. Who knows?" said Meeker. He was losing. If the vote had come right then, Joanna would have had her delay.

"Listen," Meeker said. He lowered his voice so we had to strain to hear him. "I was a wealthy man on Earth. I had a big job with ColAdmin." He

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dropped his voice even lower, as though he were choking on emotion. "Let me tell you about my apartment. It was top floor, with a window. True, the only view I had was of the brick wall across the alley. But a window!"

Meeker took a deep breath. Rain pattered above us. "My place was big. I could almost stand up in it, and it had two rooms, a four mat and a six mat. I had a cooker that I owned, and once a month I had frozen meat. As I said, I was a rich man."

I could feel the mood shifting around me.

"You look outside for a moment at what we have here," Meeker said. "Eventually we'll be growing food here. Growing it. And you can walk across a whole world now, walk outdoors without shielding, without breathing through a catalyzer. You think for a moment about what you used to have. I know none of you had it as soft as I did. You think about delay, about digging into that mountain at the last minute and finding that Balas is wrong."

"I'm not wrong!' My voice sounded too loud, too defensive.

"Let's take that vote," Meeker almost whispered.

Susan and Joanna and I voted for delay, along with a handful of others. But Meeker had known our worst fears. He had known what buttons to push. We were going to open up Mount Meeker to see for ourselves what was in there. The Shies would have to find a new totem. Meeker was smiling as he unloaded the audio chip of the meeting. He gave it to Captain Rhamal, who went back and logged it aboard the *Kepler*.

I went to Joanna to console her. "I'm not going to let it happen," she said.

"We voted," I said. "It's over."

"Like hell. Don't you see how important this is?"

"Joanna, maybe you can explain to the Shies, help them see that this is inevitable."

She shook her head and started out of the Glass House. I thought of following her, but I didn't.

I SHOULD HAVE. Fifteen minutes later we heard a high-pitched sound coming from the forest. A particle cutter.

Meeker looked around the room. "Carpaccio!" he said, and we all knew what he was thinking. The next thing I knew, I was at the head of the whole colony, running toward the end of the road we had started to build.

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She had turned the cutter on our vehicles. The tread roller had a slice right down the middle of it, and she had cut the manipulator arm from one of the utility crawlers so that it lay in the mud like an amputated claw.

"Jo!" I said.

She turned the cutter my way. The barrel leaked blue-light interference, and the accelerator hummed on her back.

"Jo," I said more quietly.

"Not another step, David. I'm going to finish this."

Other people were standing behind me now.

"Joanna," I said. "This isn't the way."

Behind me I heard Meeker join the group. "Bring me," he said, puffing. "Bring me one of the other cutters."

Joanna turned, and the cutter shrieked. She started to slice across the crawler's motor section like she was splitting a synthpotato.

"She cut 'em," I heard someone shout to the governor over the scream of the cutter.

"What?"

"The other cutters. She sliced them right down the middle. Must have been the first thing she destroyed."

"Damn."

"What about your gun, Governor? Do you know how to use it?"

Then Meeker was shouldering his way past me, the antique projectile weapon in his hand.

"No!" I shouted. "Let me talk to her!"

But the gun had already gone off, blasting the air with a sound even louder than the cutter.

I don't know if it was luck or expertise, but Meeker hit her. And I don't know if it was mercy or bad aim, but he hit her in the leg and not somewhere more vital. The beam of the cutter flashed across the trees as she fell, and then the beam switched off as she released the safety trigger.

It was quiet except for the ringing in my ears. Nobody moved. Joanna lay in the mud, still gripping the cutter nozzle. Somewhere in the trees close by, a Shy chattered.

"Somebody go retrieve that cutter," Meeker said.

Nobody moved.

I took a step forward. "Jo?"

She looked up at me, dazed. "Bastard shot me," she said.

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I nodded and stepped closer. I bent and pulled the accelerator out of its frame and took the nozzle from her hand.

Very quietly, she said, "Shoot him, David."

I looked at Meeker. He still had the gun in his hand.

"Shoot him, David. They'll listen if you shoot him."

I thought about it. She might be right. After all of this, if somebody blasted Meeker, it might slow things down again. Everyone might rethink what this colony should be about. We were making a bad start of things. Joanna was right about that.

Then again, maybe nothing would change.

Either way, I'd be a murderer. I didn't like Meeker so much anymore, but kill him?

"No," I said.

Joanna's voice was cold. She said, "Coward."

I visited Joanna every day in the brig aboard the *Kepler*. She didn't talk a lot, but I think she looked forward to my visits. Every day, like a condemned prisoner asking about the approach of her execution, she asked me how the mining was coming along.

The answer was always the same: slow, but as expected. We had salvaged parts from the four cutters she had damaged, and had patched together a second unit. But with three cutters gone and two vehicles out of commission, it took us quite a while to get to the mountain, much less start to dig in it. I'm ashamed to say that I didn't think about the Shies and their problems very much. Once we got under way, I started thinking like a miner. I wanted to get to the core of the mountain to see what we had, and that's all I thought about. I guess some of the doubts Meeker had planted in the other colonists had taken root in me, too.

So we dug, and we dug, and we dug.

One afternoon while I was down in the shaft, we broke through the outer layer and started hitting metal. It was mostly iron and nickel at first. I figured we had a ways to go yet, but nobody wanted to knock off at our usual quitting time. We kept working through the night.

When we hit a thick vein of titanium, I went to the surface to eat. The sun was coming up. I was tired and not thinking too clearly, but that's when I really should have slowed down. I should have wondered about how titanium could occur naturally like that, in a big elemental deposit.

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But I was too tired and too excited to think.

When I went back down the hole, we were close enough to the core that my hand-held sensor could give me a very precise reading on what was ahead. We were about to hit the mother lode.

We kept digging. And then I started getting strange readings.

The metals we were after started to recede from us, according to my sensor. The more titanium we sliced away, the farther my sensor told me we had to go. I figured I had a faulty power supply, but when I went up topside and tested the thing, it checked out.

The men working with the cutters were giving me dirty looks when I went back down. They were even more tired than I was. Earlier I had told them we had twenty meters to go. They had just cut through fifteen, and now I looked at my sensor and said they had twenty-five meters to go.

Fom Mah came down the shaft then and told me Joanna wanted to see me.

"Tell her we're about to break through to the good stuff," I said. "I can't go now."

We cut through the twenty-five meters in an hour. Now, at least, the sensor said we had only five meters to go.

Fom was back at the end of the hour with a note from Joanna. It said:

Vital that I see you now! *If I ever meant anything to you, this is the time to show it. Talk to me* before *you get to the mountain's core.*

Bleary-eyed for lack of sleep, I checked the sensor again. It said we had twelve meters to go. And behind the twelve new meters of titanium? I shook the sensor like it was a broken radio. Where was our gold, our gallium, our germanium? The sensor said we were digging our way to a big deposit of . . . hydrogen.

All right, damn it. I'd go see Joanna. I was grateful for the chance to turn this over to someone else for a while.

"Take over," I told Fom.

"Hey," he called as I left.

I turned.

"Leave me the sensor."

I shook my head. "It's broken," I told him, and took it with me.

Joanna was sitting by the viewscreen in her cell, watching the tower-trees at the edge of the compound sway gently in the breeze. Her leg was

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in a cast with little pink lights that flashed on and off as microcurrents of electricity worked to speed up her recovery.

She looked up and saw me gazing at the cast.

"Thinking it's an extravagance for a criminal like me?"

"Not at all."

"Have a seat." I sat on the other cushioned chair beside the viewscreen. The brig was pretty comfortable, considering.

"Thanks for coming," Joanna said. She smiled a tired smile. "You gave it a good shot at the governance meeting. I never thanked you."

"I'm sorry, Jo."

"Seen any Shies around the work site?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "They're probably terrified."

"I think you were right, Joanna," I told her. "I don't agree with everything you did, but you were right. We should have waited."

I considered her face. So pretty. She was going to go home alone, though. Back to Earth. To prison. Not that prison on Earth was a lot different from being free there. I sighed and looked at the viewscreen.

"David, I've had a lot of time to think," she said. "I think more may be at stake than the Shies. I have a theory. The mountain may be more than a sacred site. A lot more. So far, it's pure speculation, but I think that before you resume digging. . . ."

"Resume?" I said. "We're still digging right now. I left Fom in charge. Didn't he tell you that we were almost through to the core?"

"I told you to see me before you broke through!" Joanna said.

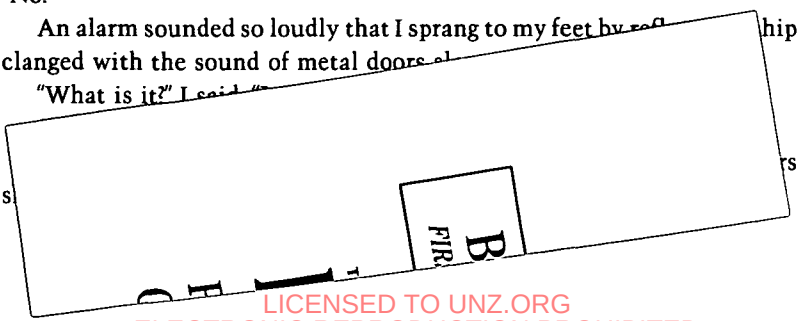
"I didn't know you meant to stop digging. What's wrong?"

Joanna stood up, wincing. "Radio Fom!" she said. "Stop him!"

The viewscreen behind her flared white — on the blink, I thought, but Joanna turned toward the light and stared. Then, very quietly, she said, "No."

An alarm sounded so loudly that I sprang to my feet by reflex. hip clanged with the sound of metal doors cl

"What is it?" I said.



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"Radiation surge," he called over his shoulder. "Stay put!"

I thought, The ship is leaking radiation, and he wants me to stay put?

But the radiation, as it turned out, was outside the ship. Behind me, Joanna said, "Look, David."

She was pointing to the screen. I looked at the picture, but I wasn't sure what I was seeing. Wind like I had never known on Veloz was tearing through the towertrees, tearing off their limbs. The trees at the edge of the compound started falling over, more and more of them, as though the wind was increasing in force. The light was strangely blue.

"What is it?" I said. "What's happening?"

Joanna shook her head and said, "How could we have been so stupid?"

The alarm stopped sounding, and I could hear the sound of the wind outside the *Kepler*. It sounded like it had when we had broken the atmosphere months ago to land.

I went to the door again.

"Where are you going?" Joanna said.

"The bridge."

When I arrived, I found everything strangely calm, except that the same picture of chaos appeared on the main viewscreen. In fact, it was exactly the same view that the screen in Joanna's cell had, which was a bit disorienting. Most of the trees were down now. The light kept flaring up, and the screen kept adjusting to compensate. Rhamal sat at his post while crew members read off numbers to him.

"Ambient pressure is point-four atmospheres and dropping," said a man on his right.

"Temperature is three-sixty absolute and climbing," said a woman.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked Rhamal.

He swiveled in his chair. "Identify yourself."

"David Balas, chief physicist. What's happening?"

Rhamal turned away from me. "As a physicist, Balas, you must have appreciated how strange the radiation levels were here on Veloz."

"Yes," I said.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that anomaly any longer," the captain said. "Everything is returning to normal."

"What?"

"Check for yourself." He indicated the bank of instruments that his crew members were reading to him.

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I checked. He was right. Veloz was returning very quickly to normal.

Normal. The star Veloz revolved around was a class F5, over five times as bright as the sun. But Veloz was a lot closer to its primary than the Earth is to Sol. Twice as close. So the radiation was twenty times as intense. The planet was frying, the atmosphere expanding explosively in the sudden heat.

"Gravity down another ten," someone reported.

"Increased mooring," said Rhamal.

Gravity down? Ten? On what scale? I thought. *Gravity* down? But then I thought of something else.

"There are people out there!" I said.

"Were," said Rhamal.

"Working on the mine. . . . I just came from there!"

"Think of the UV radiation," Rhamal said. "It's too late. They're gone."

"But in the mine. . . ," I said. "They'd be shielded."

"Three sixty-five absolute," said a voice.

"It's almost hot enough to boil sea-level water," Rhamal said. "But the pressure is way down as well. They're gone, Mr. Balas."

Gone. He said it so calmly. One hundred and thirty-eight men and women. Gone.

I looked at the viewscreen as Rhamal changed the angle of the picture. There was nothing left of our compound. Not a board. It had all blown away.

One hundred and thirty-eight men and women.

And my next thought was: I should have cut Meeker to ribbons.

We're on our way home now. We've had some long talks with Captain Rhamal, Joanna and I have. We've been cooking up a theory. Rhamal's a smart man. What Joanna hadn't already figured out, he helped us to piece together.

Before we left, we made a pass over Sky Mountain. We couldn't really see into the shaft, but at the mouth of the mine along with what was left of the equipment and a few bodies, we could see two yellowish chunks of glittering . . . *stuff*. I'm not sure whether to call it metal. It gave a different reading to the ship's sensors every time we tried to check it out, just as it had confused my hand-held sensor. But it was solid and stable enough that Fom and the others had carried some samples up before the thing that it

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was part of broke down. We had hit the mother lode. We had destroyed whatever lay under Sky Mountain.

Somebody had built the mountain. Clearly, it was someone a lot more advanced than the Shies.

Sky Mountain artificially increased the planet's gravity to help it hold an atmosphere. No, I don't know how. It managed the radiation on the surface in some way we can't even guess at so that the weather everywhere was predictable and mild. And the mountain protected certain Shies from predators, did everything necessary to keep them safe and happy. But the mountain's builders hadn't counted on us, and the mountain didn't know how to keep us from digging it open.

The Shies themselves, and the lightning dogs, and the planet's entire biota had been imported, and the whole planet was maintained to suit the needs of that single exological community. I had found the shipping containers, perhaps, in the iron hemisphere my crew and I dug up.

Mowza had understood something about how Sky Mountain worked. I remembered that he had sniffed after he said Sky, and Joanna said that, come to think of it, he had always done that. Sky Mountain. Atmosphere Mountain.

And all that stuff he said about *Mowza close now, far now*? That thing about, *Mowza close now, big far now*?

This is Joanna's idea. I think it's a good one. She thinks Mowza was trying to tell us what he was.

Mowza was a puppet.

Well, not a puppet, exactly. More like a hotel.

What I mean is that Mowza, the Shy, was a little preverbal animal on the order, like Meeker had said, of a monkey. And somewhere there was a being, a member of the race that had come and built Sky Mountain, that was inhabiting his body. Somewhere a being heard what Mowza heard, saw what Mowza saw, and at least partly controlled what Mowza did. That means simultaneous communication over a great distance. It breaks universal law as we understand it. Well, so what? If we ever find out what made Sky Mountain work, I bet we'll have to repeal some other universal laws.

Mowza was trying to tell us about this, but the being that partly controlled him had to communicate through something like a monkey brain. All he could say was *Mowza close now, big far now*. What you call Mowza is close now, but there is also a part of Mowza that is

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a big, like you, and it's far away.

Hadn't we sensed it, Joanna and I? There were two kinds of Shies, the ferals and the talkers. And I had noticed that Mowza was sometimes like a person, sometimes like an animal.

So why would a superior race make such an arrangement? Joanna has an answer to that, too.

"Have you ever wanted to be a cat?" she asked me. "To feel what it's like to be inside a cat's skin? To see through a cat's eyes?"

Even on an impoverished Earth, people kept cats, partly, Joanna thinks, because we like to imagine being animals ourselves. People once even kept dogs as pets, thought they must have been very different from the packs that hunt in Earth cities now.

So somewhere an intelligent race looked at their pets and thought, What would it be like to be inside that furry body? Unlike us, they had the means to find out, and they liked the experience so much that they engineered an entire planet as an ideal Shy environment. The feral Shies were like spare parts, with lightning dogs to keep their population in check. And these intelligent beings projected themselves into the Shies as a respite from ordinary existence. As a vacation. And that's why Shies said that to die was to "go far far." When the animal died, the other part went home. I'm afraid that with our mining blunder, we sent a lot of vacationers packing.

I said Rhamal is a smart man. He's more than that. After talking with us, he has somehow lost the audio chip that Meeker used to prefer charges against Joanna. Also, he announced to his crew that Joanna was on board at the time of the disaster as his personal guest.

"Anyone who remembers otherwise," he said, "had better check with me to have his or her status reviewed. I don't want to overpay any crew member with a faulty memory. It would be very bad for business."

He's going to recommend that we ship out with him on the next colonial voyage he makes. In fact, he's going to insist upon it.

And Joanna and me? I haven't given up hope. A couple ship-days ago, she said to me, "David, you're still pretty hard-nosed."

"I'm practical, if that's what you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean." She laughed. "But you know what?"

"What?"

"I think you're coming around," Joanna said. "And even though you aren't as cute as a Shy, you do have your points."

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Installment 45: *In Which* **Tempus** *Fidgets,* **Fugits,** *and Inevitably Omnia Revelats*

LIKE IDLE hands, my unattended mind is The Devil's Plaything. Turn my back for three seconds, to check the ingredients in a Gourmet Pride, examine the pocket lint caught under my fingernail, shun a Bud commercial during the World Series . . . and I begin with the bizarre suppositions:

All we've ever found are fossilized remains, so how do we know dinosaur skins were that Lake Erie gray or Fort Benning olive-green we always see in the paintings? We've never found any preserved epidermis, no frozen Polencanthus with its tarp intact. And there are lizards around today, descendants of the saurians, with iridescent hides, with the chameleon ability to change color, with protective pigmentations in a host of decorator hues . . . so how do we know that Montanaceratops wasn't maybe paisley? Here comes a sixty-nine foot long Alamosaurus in a fetching coruscation of rainbow shades with pastel fuchsia, carnation pink, and sky blue predominating. Sure, Baryonyx is a pain in the ass, always running around chewing out the throat of some unsuspecting Massospondylus, spraying graffitti all over the Morrison Formation, bringing down Early Cretaceous, Late Triassic, whatever, property values, but wouldja just give a look at that nifty plaid overcoat he's wearing! Who's to know? I think about stuff like that.

Or how about this: the exquisite Chinese novelist and philologist Lin Yutang (1885-1976) opined, "What is patriotism but the love of the food one ate as a child?" That insight always knocked me out; and so I began extrapolating on it. Could not one postulate that *religion* might also, likewise, be nothing

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more than a love of the food one ate as a child? And if that were so, then perhaps all the trouble Moses had with the children of Israel after they fled Egypt had less to do with the worship of golden calves than it did with fast food. That is to say, here they are schlepping around in the desert, Moses having chosen (not too wisely) to go east into the wilderness of Sinai, instead of heading north, following the coast, taking the shortest-distance-between-two-points route into Canaan; and here are the 12 Tribes, cranky and exhausted, and already pretty nervous about following this guy maybe to the ends of the earth who is "slow of speech, and of a slow tongue," which maybe meant he was a stammerer, but also could mean he lisped, and following a guy who sounds like Porky Pig or a drag queen into the desert has got them major twitchy; and they're heavily traumatized already, having barely survived lousy labor relations building the pyramids, on which gig they would get the crap kicked outta them if they asked for a gourdful of water; and this Pharaoh, Ramses II (though some say it was Memeptah), was such an uptight putz that he got God and Moses cheesed off at him, so they called down this icky concatenation of plagues including frogs, flies, turning the river to blood so all the fish went belly-up, something called *murrain* (which I looked up and it means all the cattle and other livestock started to puke, and they came down with anthrax and hoof-and-mouth and Texas fever, and like that, also sweating blood), and hail, and locusts, and blotting out the sun, and eventually because Pharaoh was such a slow learner God called in this hit man, the Angel of Death, and he knocked off all the first-born of Egypt, which was worse than *Friday the Thirteenth, Part VI* — and the 12 Tribes had to sit through all *that;* not to mention following this guy through a body of water that opened up to let them pass and then came flooding back in to wipe out the entire standing army of Ramses II (or possibly Memeptah); so by the time they find themselves schlepping around in the desert, not too terrific a location, for three months . . . their nerves are, not to put too fine a point on it, most severely frayed. And they get to Mt. Horeb (some say it was Mount Seir), and all they've been eating for the last ninety days is this manna. Now, manna is okay once in a while, as a side-dish in place of potatoes or Mrs. Cubbison's stuffing, but day after day for three bloody *months*! Come *on!* I mean, you know how sick you get of turkey leftovers after Thanksgiving, for just under a

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week? Picture how sweet-tempered *you'd* be if you had to go footing it through some miserable desert with nothing to scarf down but turkey giblets. So they get to Horeb, and some of the shop stewards of the 12 Tribes come to see Moses, and they lay it right on the line. "Look, Mo," one of them says, "let me be frank with you. We're up to here with the manna, you know what I'm saying? We don't mean to bitch about it, what I mean it was strictly swell of Yahweh to drop the manna on us —even if we had one helluva time getting all the sand and grit out of it — but c'mon already, we've had manna sandwiches and manna *soufflé*, manna soup and manna pudding topped with creamed manna, chipped manna on toast, rack of manna, sunnyside-up manna on matzoh, manna *purée* and those cute little manna croquettes — and to be absolutely candid about it, Moses sweetie . . . IF WE EAT ONE MORE FUCKIN' MEAL OF MANNA WE'RE ALL GOING TO SLASH OUR WRISTS!!! So Moses says okay, okay, don't bust my chops (to which one of the shop stewards murmurs, "I'd go through frogs and flies and *murraine* for a nice chop"), and he tells them to cool it till he goes up on the mountain and has this sit-down with the Lord, and as soon as he gets back they'll detour toward Canaan and find the first clean roadside diner, and everybody can sheep out (because to *pig* out would be trayf). So Moses takes off, and the 12 Tribes wait around for forty days and forty nights — eating nothing but fried manna, stewed manna, manna ragout, cold poached manna on a bed of shredded manna, manna *crêpes*, manna fingers with grit topping, broiled manna, and those nasty little manna croquettes — and somebody in his right mind says, "Let's look on the bright side: maybe Moses was eaten by a bear, and let's get the hell outta here and find a nice Howard Johnson's or at worst a Burger King, and t'hell with this wandering in the Sinai shtick!" And everybody says something in unison like *Works for me,* and they get Moses's brother, Aaron, to make up this golden calf to kind of raise their spirits preparatory to moving out, and all of a sudden here comes Moses, after forty bleeding days and nights, and he's schlepping these stone tablets and he starts screaming at them that one of the Commandments is that they're not supposed to make any graven idols because it'll get Yahweh really pissed off, and they all yell back at him, "Hey, schmuck, how were *we* supposed to know that was one of the rules? You're just bringing them down now! What're we, supposed to be telepathic!?!" But Moses keeps

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geshrying at them, and they tell him to get stuffed, all they wanted was a nice piece gefilte fish or a piece flanken, and God hears all this and directs that half the Tribes should murder the other half, not to mention that for punishment they've got to wander in this stupid desert for another forty *years*! Geez, talk about a tough grader! I think about stuff like that.

I wonder who Ben Gay was; and was there ever an Absorbine, Sr.

I muse about weird stuff like: if DNA contains all the memory of the original organism, is capable of transmitting genetic information, then isn't it possible that the molecule could also transmit racial memory, and if that's so, then maybe the persistence of belief in reincarnation is nothing more than our DNA giving us the genetic *dējà vu* of "past lives" experienced by the RNA and other nucleic acids. I think about stuff like that.

And I had this peculiar, but I think logical, surmise: since Neanderthals had no understanding of "time" — that is to say, no possibility of comprehending the concept of "the future" — when Pleistocene Patty seduced Sly the Slope-Browed into hauling her ashes, or Harry Hominid commited date-rape on Aliciapithecus, did they make the connection between the, uh, er, connection *now*, and the birth of Java Junior nine months down the line?

Without a sense of being part of a chronological flow, how did Cro-Magnons understand that a fiery itch in their loins *today* could result in another mouth to feed about a year from today? And who was the first to figure it out? Sure as hell wasn't Jesse Helms, despite the resemblance to *Dendropithecus*.

Which random woolgathering brings me, widdershins and clanking, to my cinematic subject, to wit, the value of the *Back to the Future* trilogy. I think about stuff like that.

BACK IN the January 1986 installment of this column, I had more than a few things to say about *Back to the Future*; none of them likely to be ellipsed and quoted on the one-sheets. At the time I wrote installment 14 — with subsequent opprobrious references to the film in essays on other topics — sort of a paradigm for all that had become "trivial as a Twinkie" in sf movies — I was unaware that two sequels were in the planning stages. Nor was I aware of how smartly I would turn on my heel, now, four years later, in my opinion of the work.

It's not so much that my opinion of the first film was "wrong" or even wrongheaded. My judgment of that single film, standing alone, is stet. But taken as one-third of a cine-

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matic triptych, well, not judging the first *Back to the Future* as part of the whole, *in situ*, would be like passing esthetic judgment on Bosch's *The Adoration of the Magi* having seen only the right-hand panel.

That is to say, upon reflection and viewing of *Back to the Future II* and BACK TO THE FUTURE III (Universal/Amblin) the whole is definitely greater than the sum of the parts.

The contrived shenanigans of Michael J. Fox's "Marty McFly" and Christopher Lloyd's "Dr. Emmett Brown" and Thomas F. Wilson's "Biff Tannen" are not the impetus for this reevaluation — which plot folderol still seems to me hardly a patch on the human and philosophical questions raised by *Peggy Sue Got Married*, the time-travel film that was contemporaneous with the first *Back to the Future* — but their tripartite hugger-mugger assumes a greater significance, and an unexpected possibility of richer purpose than the first film implied, taken on sum.

The second film was almost universally panned as incomplete, unable to stand on its own without the buttressing foreword and afterword. Naturally, being out of synch with the rest of the universe, I admired *Part II* the most. Probably because it was the most inventive, and consequently the least accessible to the general viewing audience (and fer damned sure harder to understand for the general run of film critics whose bleary confusion was hysterically evident).

Part I was a slaphappy teen movie with a standard timetwist. *Part III* is equally goony in an obstinately lovable, Keystone Kop, rubberfaced manner. (And one day soon remind me to give you some thoughts on movies that fall all over themselves trying to make you love them.) The paradox problems raised in *Part II* pay off as Marty goes slipstreaming back to 1885, the Old West of John Ford and Anthony Mann, riding his faithful cayuse, the 1985 DeLorean. He rescues Doc Brown from a preordained demise, he defies the wobbly internal logic of time travel set up in *Parts I* and *II*, and finally comes home in time (and space) to an acceptable status quo, *avec* steam engine.

Nothing in the first and third segments of this trilogy will strain your mind much. Which is likely why they were so outrageously praised.

But *Part II*, in which Marty and Doc Brown have to set things aright in the year 2015, after setting up a kind of chronosynclastic infindibulum in 1955, is twisty, turny, and terrifically tangy. It is also sf/fantasy of a considerably higher order

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than we usually get in theatrical features.

After viewing *Part I* four years ago, I didn't expect much from a sequel that I presumed had been ordered up as strictly a money-making endeavor. And when I learned that *II* and *III* were to be shot together, well, I fear my cynical nature slipped a drop or two of hemlock into my expectations. But *Part II*, which I admire considerably when melded with its sidekicks, may possibly be an icon that will serve the commonweal. A postulation that may be as ineffective as emetic, as was the hemlock of my cynicism. But what the hell.

The nihilism of the '80s which with only a trembling of wariness at the sight of Charles Keating in chains and Michael Milken in the dock seems to be living on into the '90s, is a far cry from the much-derided sense of social conscience that fueled the reforms of the '60s and '70s. I've belabored this elsewhere; I won't reiterate; save to suggest that neither an Ollie North nor an Ivan Boesky would have been tolerated in those days of social upheaval.

But Reagan and Nixon and Bush have had their way with the *vox populi* and me-firstism has been the order of the times for far too long.

So I'm grasping at straws when I suggest that *possibly* a trio of popular flicks, the *Back to the Future* totality, might serve to pique the intellect of the pithecanthropoid who, having had sex nine months earlier, might experience that leap of extrapolation and connect it with the birth of the baby today.

Because *I*, *II*, and *III* — but primarily the unjustly maligned *II* — deal with the subject of responsibility. Not just to the loved ones, but to the world as a whole, to posterity, to the generations yet unborn. These films traffic in cause and effect, a concept earlier times in this country dealt with regularly. A concept that seems nonexistent in the world today.

If you suggest to the rapacious mini-mall developer that leveling the woods and rendering much of that acreage as concrete parking lot will surely raise the mean temperature of the area, s/he will stare at you as if your eyes droop on stalks. S/he will then talk about "progress" and "jobs" and how selfish you must be to want to thwart honest enterprise.

If you brace a kid three blocks from a McDonald's, who has just pitched his milk shake cup and french fries container into the street, and point out that litter is not only unsightly, but has to be cleaned up by others, that it is probably non-biodegradable, and that s/he ought to think of others, s/he will flip you off, snort derisively, log you in as

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an uptight loony definitely uncool, and go on her/his merry way.

And if you go down to Brazil and tell some poor *mestizo* getting a measly hundred *cruzeiros* a day to clearcut the rain forest, so it can be planted in grain to feed beeves that will then be converted into precisely those McDonald's goodies whose wrappers find their way into city streets in Akron and Anchorage and Amityville, he will tell you that his three babies up in the *favella* need milk, that his wife has rickets, that this is the first steady employment, however exhausting and minimally rewarded, he's been able to get since last *Fevereiro*. And how do you fight that, looking into his weary face?

So we live in the moment, having been brainwashed for decades like the Me Decade to believe that it is not what we *think*, but what we *feel*, that is worthy of attention. We live on the edge of the instant, with no regard (and seemingly no understanding) for what comes next, and how every breath and gesture and movement is linkage with the future.

We do not seem to understand that if we fuck today, we will give birth nine months from now.

But here is this trilogy of lightweight, happy-go-lucky films with a lovable mad scientist, an oh-so-hip role-model for kids, and a standard issue schoolyard bully (brilliantly assayed by Thomas Wilson, whose performances seem richer and deeper with each viewing), and the films *demonstrate* that every action has a resultant price that must be paid. If not today, then next week, or next year. The films say: Caution! Think about it now, while you have the chance.

That's no small message in these parlous times.

Responsibility.

An abstract concept when Mom and Dad speak to the kids; a nebulosity when teachers program it into their lessons; a vagueness having no immediate worth when people do what they do. (Which is why I've never believed for an instant that the death penalty deters *anyone* from acting like a thug.)

But here come these three funny, action-filled movies . . .

All three of which are available for straight-through viewing on videocassette, all in one long evening. And there is just this tiniest tinkle of a salvation bell in my head, that says if cinema is *truly* as influential as Hollywood would have us believe, then for once maybe the message hasn't been that women are fodder, that vigilantism is the only answer to street crime, that villains need not necessarily be Dr. No or Manuel Noriega . . . that the villains may be us only

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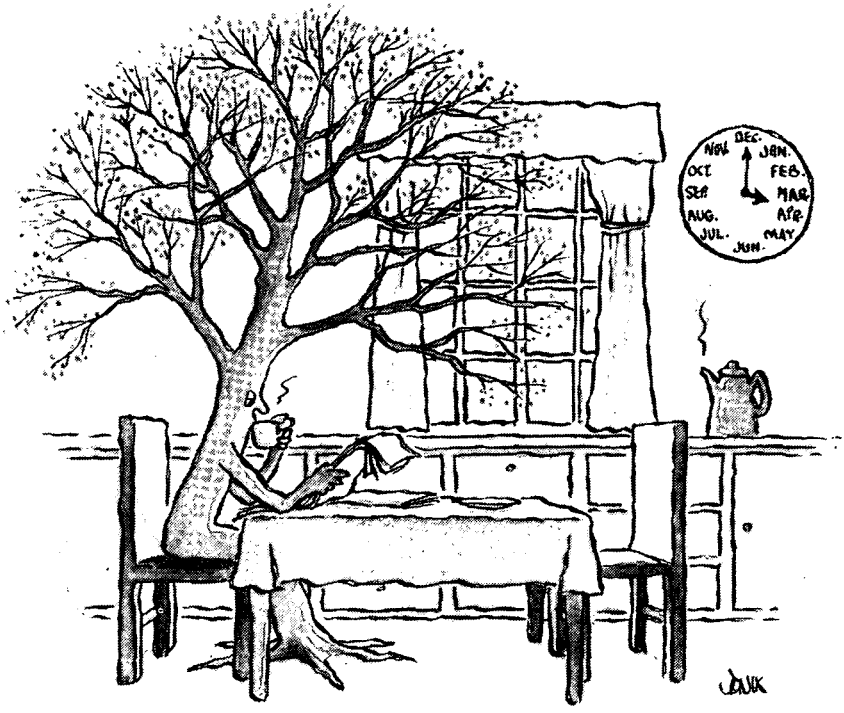
and simply because we didn't think about tomorrow.

And that's some terrific supposition, even if it's crazy as an optimist in front of a Dachau oven. But it's stranger things than that to which we can pay homage in the erratic progress of our species from paramecium to pollution.

Yeah, even a cynic thinks about stuff like that.



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Alan Dean Foster offers a new story about Amos Malone, in which the giant mountain man becomes involved in an enormously entertaining contest revolving around a cursed land and some instant farming.

AGRARIAN DEFORM

By Alan Dean Foster

"YOU TALK TO HIM, JESSE."

"Not me. Look at him. It can't be the right man."

"Have to be," said George Franklin. "Can't be another human being on God's green earth looks like that. It's him fer sure."

They argued vociferously among themselves. Since no one was willing to approach their quarry alone, they had no choice but to do so in a body.

"Shoot," Deaf Williams pointed out, "he's jest sittin' there whittlin'. Ain't like he's gnawin' on baby bones."

"Yeah," said Slim Martin, "but you ever see anybody whittlin' with a bowie knife before?"

Having finally screwed up sufficient courage to approach the giant, they found they had nothing to say.

Amos Malone pushed back the wolf head that covered his scalp, and regarded the sightseers. From somewhere behind that impenetrable black beard, luxuriant enough to offer succor and shelter to any number of

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small unidentifiable creatures, a surprisingly balsamic voice arose to break the uncomfortable silence.

"You folks never seed a man whittlin' afore?"

As the wealthiest and largest of the six, it fell to George Franklin to reply. Also, his erstwhile friends and neighbors were doing a fine job of concealing themselves behind him.

"Are you Amos Malone?" He swallowed uneasily. "The one they call Mad Amos?"

The bowie knife sliced. Wood chips flew. Standing there on the covered porch outside the hotel, Franklin was acutely conscious of the proximity of his belly to that huge hunk of razor-sharp metal.

"Wal, 'tis Amos Malone I am, but at the moment I ain't particularly mad. Next week, now, I wouldn't vouch fer that." He paused, squinted up at Franklin. "Kin I do something fer you folks, or are y'all just wanderin' art lovers?"

Jesse Kinkaid stepped forward. "Mr. Malone, sir, we got ourselves a bit of a goin' problem. Word around is that you might be the man to help us out."

"We can pay," Franklin added hastily, grateful for the supportive voice of a neighbor.

"Ain't said I'd take the job yet." Malone sheathed the knife, scratched at the hem of his buckskin jacket with a huge, callused hand. "What makes you think I'm the feller you need?"

The men exchanged glances. Though there were six of them, they were peaceable folk, and they felt badly outnumbered. "Now, don't be takin' this as no insult, Mr. Malone," Kinkaid said cautiously, "but the word in these parts is that you're some kind of magician."

"Black magic," said Deaf Jackson much too loudly before his friends could shush him.

Malone just smiled. At least, it looked like a smile to Kinkaid and Franklin. One couldn't be sure because only the center portion of the man's mouth was visible behind his black rat's nest of a beard. You couldn't tell what the corners of his mouth were up to.

"I'm no magician, gentlemens. Jest a poor seeker after knowledge. A wanderin' scholar, you might say."

"What kind of knowledge might you be seeking, sir?" Young Hotchkiss was too wet behind the ears to know that in California territory, it was

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impolite at best — and potentially lethal at worse — to inquire too deeply into another man's business.

Malone took no offense, however, and smiled at the youth. Wiser men among the six heaved silent sighs of relief.

"Oh, this and that, that and this. Same thing as the poor feller Demosthenes. He has his lamp, and I've got that." He gestured out into the street, indicating a massive horse of unidentifiable parentage.

Young Hotchkiss would have asked who Demosthenes was . . . sounded like a furriner . . . but Franklin hastened to cut him off before he said too much.

"The point being, sir, that you are rumored to be in the possession of certain arcane skills." When Malone did not comment, but instead waited patiently, Franklin continued. "We are farmers, sir. Simple farmers."

"I'd say that's right on both counts." Malone held his whittling up to the light, examining it carefully.

Franklin looked helplessly to his neighbors. Again it was Kinkaid who picked up the gauntlet. "Mr. Malone, sir, we got ourselves real troubles. Our land is, well, sir, it seems to be cursed."

The mountain man looked up at him. "Cursed, sir?"

Kinkaid nodded somberly. "Cursed."

"I wonder if you mightn't be a tad more specific, friend."

Emboldened, Slim Martin spoke up. "It's our crops, Mr. Malone. They get lots of water, plenty of sun. We work as hard as any folk in the Central Valley, but it don't make no difference. Corn tops out at less than a foot; apples just shrivel on the tree; tomatoes never get ripe. It's a caution, sir. And it don't seem to matter none what we plant. Nothin' comes up proper."

Malone straightened in the chair, which groaned under his weight. "An' you think I kin help you?" It was not necessary for them to reply: their desperation was plain on their sunburned faces.

"Now I ask you fair, gentlemens: do I look like a farmer to you?"

They eyed him up and down, noting the heavy goatskin boots, the wolf's-head chapeau, the bowie knife and LeMat pistol secured at his waist, the twin bandoliers of enormous Sharps buffalo-rifle cartridges that crisscrossed his massive chest, and the truth of what he said laid them low.

A couple turned to leave, but not Kinkaid. "Sir," he pleaded desperately,

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"if you can help us, we'd be more than just obliged. Most of us" — and he gestured at his companions — "came to this country for the gold. Well, the placer gold's all run out, and big companies have taken over most of the claims up in the high country and on the American River.

"When the big money started moving in, a lot of folks picked up and left, but some of us stayed. My people are Illinois original, and I know fine farming country when I see it. A man ought to be able to make a good living out of this earth hereabouts. Plenty of folks are: those working the valley to the east of us.

"I don't mind bein' run off by bandits, or the weather, or grizzlies or Indians, but I'm damned if I'll give up and just walk away from my spread without having a reason why."

Malone considered silently. Then he rose. Involuntarily, the little knot of farmers retreated a step. The mountain man had to bend to avoid bumping his head on the porch roof that shaded the sidewalk.

"Like I said, I ain't no farmer. But I don't like to see good folks driven off their places when mebbee there's a simple straight way their troubles kin be fixed. So I will have a look-see at your country, gentlemens. Don't promise that I kin do nothin' for you, but a look-see I'll have."

"As to the matter of payment," Franklin began.

"Let me see if I kin help you folks out first," Malone told him. "If I can fix your problems, then it'll cost you, oh, a hundred dollars U.S. In gold." Franklin inhaled sharply, but said nothing. "Until then, bed and vittles will do me jest fine. A bucket or two of oats for Worthless wouldn't be turned down, neither."

Across the street the enormous multicolored nag looked back at the group and whinnied.

Franklin and Kinkaid exchanged a glance, then Franklin turned back to the mountain man and nodded. "Agreed."

Buoyed by their success, but simultaneously wary of the man they'd engaged, the farmers headed for their own mounts, or, in the case of Franklin and Kinkaid, a fine new buckboard.

"Think he's the man?" Kinkaid asked his neighbor.

"I don't know, Jesse." Franklin glanced back up the street, to where the mountain man was mounting his ridiculous animal. "Might be he's telling us the truth when he says he doesn't know a thing about farming."

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Kinkaid lowered his gaze. "Well, it weren't a farmer we come to find, was it?"

"I'm not very confident about the other, either," Franklin murmured. "I don't see anything remarkable about him except his size."

Deaf Jackson swung his right leg over his saddle. "What'd you expect to find, George? Somebody with horns growin' out of their head, breathin' fire and riding a cloud?"

"No, I expect not." Franklin heaved himself up into the buckboard while Kinkaid took the reins.

Young Hotchkiss mounted alongside Slim Martin. "Funny thing, back there."

"What's that?" Martin asked him as they turned up the street that led out of San Jose.

"That odd-looking horse of his turning back to us and whinnying when we were talking about him."

"What's funny about that?"

"Malone wasn't talking that loud, and there were wagons and horses going all the time we was there. How'd that animal hear him clear across that street?"

Malone had been studying the terrain ever since they'd ridden south out of San Jose. Rolling hills that gave way to flat, grassy plains. You could smell the richness of the soil. Blessed as it was with adequate water and California sunshine, there was no reason why the soil they were traveling shouldn't produce crops as fine and healthy as any in the world.

But it was not. Something was wrong with this land, something major unpleasant, Malone decided.

The men kept their distance from him, wary and uncertain. All except Young Hotchkiss, who was too green to know better. He rode alongside, keeping the stranger company and asking too many questions for his own good. But the mountain man didn't appear to mind, and the others were delighted to include among their number one fool whose chattering ignorance served to free them of the accusation of inhospitality.

"That's quite a hat you've got, sir. Did you kill the animal yourself?" The young farmer indicated the wolf's head that protected Malone's scalp.

The mountain man kept his attention on the land ahead, studying the soil, the increasingly twisted trees and scraggly brush. Surely it was

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damaged country they were entering. Sick country.

"I didn't kill it," he replied offhandedly. "It ain't dead."

Young Hotchkiss hesitated, as though he hadn't heard correctly. "Begging your pardon, sir?"

"It ain't dead." Reaching up, he adjusted the wolf head over his forehead.

Hotchkiss regarded the canine skull. "I wouldn't be found calling you a liar to save my life, Mr. Malone, but if it ain't dead, then where's the rest of it?"

"In a cave a thousand feet above the Snake River. Old wolf's denned up for the winter. Since he don't need his head while he's hibernatin', he didn't see the harm in lettin' me borry it till spring. I told him I'd look out for his family in return." Malone leaned close and whispered conspiratorially. "Don't talk too loud, or you're likely to wake him up. I don't know what his head's likely to do without the rest of him, but it might not be real pleasant."

The wide-eyed young farmer nodded, and spurred his mount to rejoin his companions up ahead. As soon as he'd gone, Worthless cocked his head back to peer up out of his good eye at the man on his back.

"What're you squintin' at, you useless offspring of a spavined mule? The boy was gettin' to be somethin' of an irritation."

The Percheron-*cum*-Appaloosa-*cum*-Arabian-*cum*-unicorn snorted with great deliberation, compelling his rider to wipe his left boot while visiting additional imprecations upon his mount, which plodded on thoroughly unimpressed.

The town wasn't much: schoolhouse, church, smithy, barber, two general stores, a small hotel; the spittin' image of a thousand similar farming communities all across the country.

A woman with two kids was coming out of the general store. When she saw the riders approach, she ran back inside. Several men emerged to greet the tired arrivals.

"Well, we're back!" said Deaf Jackson loudly as he dismounted.

"Yep. This is Malone," said Kinkaid. "The man we heard about."

The two men standing on the store porch looked uncomfortable. Franklin eased himself down from the buckboard and mounted the steps to confront them.

"Josiah, Andrew; what's going on here? This isn't the greeting we ex-

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pected. What is our friend Mr. Malone going to think?"

The storekeeper picked at his apron. "You're late, George."

Franklin frowned. "What's that got to do with anything? It took considerable time to find our man."

"Well, George," said the storekeeper's companion, "it's just that you all were gone so long, and then this other gentleman rode into town. . . ."

Franklin's eyebrows rose. "Other gentleman?"

"Me."

All eyes went to the general store's entrance. The man who stood there was as thin as Slim Martin, but taller. He had pale blue eyes and undisciplined blond hair and rather more lines in his face than he ought to. He wore a brightly checked, long-sleeved flannel shirt over a new pair of Mr. Levi's best pants, and was masticating a chaw of the store's best tobacco.

"And who might you be, sir?" Jesse Kinkaid inquired.

"Sam. Folks just call me Sam. You can call me Sam, too." His gaze rose to the silent, contemplative mountain man. "So can you, friend. That's me; just plain Sam. The farmer's best friend."

Malone touched the nose of his unusual headgear with the tip of one finger.

Franklin, Kinkaid, and the rest gathered around the two men from the store. Intense whispering ensued.

"Andrew, how could you go an' hire somebody when you knew we were lookin' for this Malone fella?"

"Well, George, he just wandered in, and we all got to talking, and he said he was sure he could help us. Before we go an' do something dumb, let's think this thing through. How much is that Malone gonna cost us?"

"Hundred dollars." Kinkaid murmured.

The storekeeper looked triumphant. "This Sam fella says he'll fix all our troubles for fifty."

"Fifty?" said Slim Martin eagerly.

"Now listen here," young Hotchkiss began, "we've as much as hired this gentleman Malone. He's rode all the way down from San Jose with us, expecting to be employed on our behalf, and—"

"Shut up, boy," Franklin snapped. "Pay attention to your betters. Fifty, hmmm?" The two men from the store nodded.

Franklin turned and put on his best smile, simultaneously checking to make certain that no one stood between him and the open doorway.

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"Mr. Malone, sir, I don't quite know what to say. I'm afraid we've got ourselves a situation here."

The mountain man regarded him unblinkingly. "Situation?"

"Yes, sir." Franklin shaded his eyes against the March sun. "It seems that unbeknownst to the rest of us, our friends here have gone and hired this other gentleman to assist with our difficulties. I'm sure you understand that since he was engaged first, the conditions of his employment take precedent over yours."

Malone glanced at the tall, thin individual standing on the porch chewing tobacco, then looked back down at the big farmer.

"No problem, friend."

Franklin's heart, which had commenced to beating as if in expectation of the Final Judgment, resumed a more reasonable rhythm. "It's only business, sir. Perhaps we can make use of your services another time."

"Perhaps." Malone glance down the narrow street. "I'll just find Worthless a stall for the night, and tomorrow I'll be on my way." Again a finger rose to touch the lip of the wolf's head.

HE HEARD the footsteps approaching. It was pitch-dark in the stable. In the stall across the way, Worthless slept soundly, for a change not snoring. Two stalls farther up, a mare shuffled against her straw.

Wil Hotchkiss quietly approached the recumbent bulk of the mountain man. No one had seen him enter the barn. He reached out to shake the man's shoulder.

Less than a second later, Wil was lying on his back in the straw, a knife blade more than an inch wide so close to his Adam's apple he could feel the chill from the steel. An immense shape loomed over him, and for an instant he thought the eyes glaring down at him were glowing with an internal light of their own, though whether they belonged to the man atop him or to the wolf-skull headpiece in the corner, he could not say.

"Hotchkiss." Malone sat back on his haunches, a mountainous shape in the dim light. The massive blade withdrew.

The young farmer sat up slowly, unconsciously caressing his throat. "You're mighty fast for a man your size, Mr. Malone, sir."

"And you're mighty stupid even for one so young." The mountain man sheathed his blade. "Don't you know better than to sneak up on a man

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in the middle of the night? Your head could've ended up a play-pretty for my wolf friend's cubs."

"Sorry, but I had to come get you without my neighbors knowing what I was about."

"Did you, now?"

"Mr. Malone, sir, it weren't right how my neighbors treated you today. It just weren't right. And I think they're wrong about that Sam fella. Something about him rubs me the wrong way.

"I'd like for you to come out to my place, sir, and see if you can't do something for my land. I'll pay you myself. I've got a little money put aside. I'd rather have you working for me than have that Sam fella."

"What, now? In the middle of the night?"

"If you would, sir. That way my neighbors won't be disturbed by my doing this behind their backs, as it were. It's them I've got to live with after both you and this Sam fella are gone."

Malone rose, grinning in the darkness. "And if I turn out to be the biggest fraud since Munchausen, I won't embarrass you in front of your peers, is that it?" He waved off Hotchkiss's incipient protest. "No, never you mind, son. This ain't a bad way to go about it. I don't like bein' embarrassed any more than you do. So if'n I can't extricate you from your troubles, why, this way there won't be none others to see me fail."

Hotchkiss waited nervously until the mountain man had saddled his complaining, grumbling mount. The animal's spirits picked up considerably once outside the stable, however. Hotchkiss had come into town on a wagon pulled by two mares, one of whom was near coming into her time.

Nor had the young farmer come by himself. Seated on the wagon, holding the reins and bundled against the evening chill, was a vision of pure country grace.

"Mr. Malone, this is my wife, Emma."

"Mr. Malone." She eyed him about the way Worthless was eyeing the nearest mare. Malone pursed his lips.

"M'am."

She kept up a steady stream of chatter all the way out of town, laughing and giggling and batting her eyes at him like an advertisement for a minstrel show, all physical innuendo and sly music. Hotchkiss guided his animals, his attention on the road ahead, oblivious to nocturnal flirting so blatant it would have put a blush on a bachelor jackrabbit.

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Nor did it cease when they reached the neat wood-and-stone farmhouse. Sweet Emma Hotchkiss managed to bump up against Malone once outside and once on the way in, where she made a grand production out of removing her cloak and bending toothsomely to stir the sleeping fire. Malone eyed her speculatively. She was a bumptious, simmering three-ring circus barely restrained by tight gingham and lace, and no ringmaster in sight.

Nor was she the only surprise awaiting him.

As Hotchkiss led him into the sitting room, a lanky shape uncoiled from the couch to greet him with a smile. "Malone, ain't it?" A hand extended toward him. "Ought to be an interesting evening."

Malone did not take the proffered hand, turned instead to his host. "What is this?"

Hotchkiss looked uncomfortable. "I said that I felt my neighbors had treated you unfairly, Mr. Malone, and I hold to that. But they're thinking of the money in their pockets instead of their futures, and I'm not. I don't care who helps us so long as someone does, right quick. Otherwise, everyone in this part of the country is going to go under before the next harvest.

"So I thought the only fair thing would be for me to hire the both of you for one night to see what each of you can do."

Malone stroked his beard as he eyed his host. "Reckon I was wrong about you, son. You're only half-stupid."

Emma Hotchkiss turned gaily from the fire, which wasn't smoldering half so much as she, and eyed each of her visitors in turn.

"I think Wil was ever so clever for thinking of this. He's such a clever boy. And if both of you gentlemen can help us, why, then we'll be twice as well off, won't we? I'll be ever so happy to thank the best man with a nice kiss on the cheek."

Sure she would, Malone thought, watching her. The way Venus wanted to kiss Tannhäuser in that German feller's opera.

Hotchkiss seemed oblivious to it all, his mind on his crops when he ought to have been paying more attention to his field. "How long after you've finished your work will it take to show results? A month? two?"

"Shoot, no, neighbor," said Sam the farmer's friend. "I can't speak for Mr. Malone, but as for myself, I think we can prove something right here tonight." He smiled up at the mountain man. "What about it, friend?"

"I don't like contests," Malone rumbled.

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The lanky stranger shrugged. "Don't matter one way or the other to me. The other good folks hereabouts seem pretty convinced of my skills already. I don't mind accepting a forfeit."

Malone was being truthful. He didn't like contests, and he didn't like the way he'd been rousted out of a sound sleep on false pretense. But he also didn't like the way this blond stranger was eyeing his host's young wife. Not that she wasn't encouraging him, along with probably every other human male west of the Sierras, but it wasn't very tactful of him to respond so readily.

"I don't like forfeits, either. Might be harmful to my reputation."

"And do you have a reputation, friend?" Sam asked him tauntingly.

"Here and there. Not always good. How about you?"

"Me? Why I'm Sam, just plain Sam. The farmer's friend." He winked at Emma Hotchkiss. Her husband didn't see it, but Malone did. She responded by licking her upper lip. From what Malone could see, it didn't look chapped.

"What say we have a look at these fine folks' uncooperative land, Mr. Malone?"

The mountain man nodded. "I think that'd be a right sound place to begin."

Hotchkiss provided lanterns to complement the light of the full moon. The four of them walked outside, the young farmer and his wife leading the way toward the nearest field. The stranger toted a large canvas satchel, his eyes eagerly following Emma Hotchkiss as he envisioned the bonus he imagined would be his before the night was over. Malone carried a small pouch he'd extracted from one of his saddlebags, and with unvoiced disapproval watched the stranger watching Emma.

The sound of wood striking ground drew their attention. Everyone looked toward the corral as two shapes bolted into the moonlight.

"I tried to tell you, Wil, that your mare was coming into heat," Emma Hotchkiss said accusingly.

"Don't worry none, son." Malone followed the galloping, rollicking pair with his eyes as they disappeared over the nearest hill. "Worthless won't hurt her. They'll have themselves their run, and he'll bring her back."

Hotchkiss looked uncertain. "Can't you call him in?"

Malone shook his head. "Worthless pretty much does as he pleases. I reckon they'll have themselves a tour of most of your property be-

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fore he feels winded enough to amble on back.

"Hard to believe that a man who can't control his horse can do much with the earth," the stranger observed insinuatingly.

The mountain man looked down at him. "Tryin' to control Worthless would be about like tryin' to control the earth. Myself, I'd rather have a friend for a mount than a slave."

The neatly turned field stretched eastward, bathed in pale moonlight. Rye grass whispered warningly beneath their feet. A single silhouetted tree stood leafless, lonely and bruised amidst a mound of broken yellow rock. There was no wind, no clouds: it was a place where a man could smell silence.

A deep creek ran between the two sloping halves of the field. Malone studied it thoughtfully, then bent to examine the soil. Lifting a pinch of dirt to his nose, he inhaled deeply, then tasted of the earth. He straightened.

"Sour," he declared brusquely as he brushed his hands together to clean them.

The stranger nodded, eyed the mountain man with new respect. "That was my thought as well. You do know something about the earth, friend."

Malone eyed him evenly. "This and that."

The stranger hesitated a moment longer. "Well, then, this looks like as good a place to begin as any." Reaching into his satchel, he fumbled around until he found a pinch of seed. He flicked it earthward and waited, eyes glittering.

"Father Joseph!" Wil Hotchkiss whispered, staring at the ground.

Where the seed had landed, tiny pools of light appeared in the sterile furrow. They spread, trickling together within the soil, a pale green glowing effulgence staining the dark loam.

As the four looked on, tiny stems broke the surface. Vines first, climbing toward the moon like umber snakes. Three feet high they were when they halted. Like soap bubbles emerging from a child's toy pipe, bright red fruit began to appear beneath the green leaves, swollen and red-ripe as the lips of a succubus. The stranger turned proudly to the farming couple. His words were directed at both of them, but his eyes were intent on Emma Hotchkiss.

"Well, now, that wasn't so difficult, was it?"

"Tomatoes," Hotchkiss was muttering. "Finest damn tomatoes I ever

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Not vines this time, but entire trees emerged from the ground.

seen. In March." He eyed the stranger warily. "This ain't farming, sir. It's witchcraft."

"Not at all, friend, not at all," the stranger replied smooth as cream. "Merely the application of sound agrarian principles." He glanced at the mountain man. "Wouldn't you agree, sir?"

"Too soon to say." Malone grunted and reached into the bag he carried. Choosing another furrow, he scattered seeds of his own.

The earth did not glow where they landed. Instead, it rumbled softly like an old man's belly. Emma Hotchkiss put her palms to her face as she stared. Even the stranger backed away.

Not vines this time, but entire trees emerged from the ground. Fruit appeared on thickening branches, bright and bursting with tart juice. At Malone's urging, Wil Hotchkiss tentatively plucked one from a lower branch, rotated it with his fingers.

"Oranges." His gaze shifted between the modest tomato bushes and the full-blown orchard and did not have to give voice to how he felt.

Frowning, the stranger selected and spread another handful of seed. This time the vines that arose with unnatural rapidity from the earth were shorter but thicker than those that had preceded them. With a grandiose wave of his hand, he beckoned the young farmer close.

Wil Hotchkiss knelt to examine the thumb-sized dark fruit. "Grapes," he exclaimed. "And already ripe!"

"Sam, that's fabulously clever," said Emma Hotchkiss, throwing her arms around the stranger and bussing him not anywhere near his cheek. He responded without hesitation, the both of them ignoring Wil Hotchkiss, who was wholly intent upon the miraculous grapes.

Malone surveyed the scene and shook his head. Then he sighed and carefully dusted a nearby mound with seed. This time, it was as if the earth itself coughed rather than rumbled, as if uncertainly trying to digest the unexpected fodder. New vines emerged with astonishing speed. To everyone's surprise except Malone's, they looked no different from those the stranger had just called forth.

"Well." Wil Hotchkiss sounded slightly disappointed. "A tie."

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"Things ain't always as they seem, son. Taste one," Malone suggested.

The young farmer did so, and as the grape squinched between his teeth, his eyes widened. He stared wonderingly up at the mountain man.

"Already turned to wine . . . on the vine!"

"Mr. Malone!" his wife exclaimed. "How wonderful!" But her attempt to explore her other guest was doomed to defeat, as Malone was too tall for her to reach, even on tiptoes, and he declined to bend. She settled for favoring him with a look that despite his resolve raised his body temperature half a degree.

"I don't know how you did that." The stranger's disposition had passed from mild upset to middlin' anger. "But fruit isn't all that this land will produce, if coaxed by someone who knows truly the ways of the soil."

He whirled and flung a handful of seed in a wide arc. Where they struck, a section of earth the size of Hotchkiss's corral began to burn with cold green fire. Clods and clumps of earth were tossed aside as trunks two feet thick erupted from the ground. No fruit hung bounteous and ready to pick from the gnarled, new-formed branches. Hotchkiss searched a black extrusion until he found the first of the small oval clusters that were as wooden-dark as the branch itself.

"Walnuts," he exclaimed, picking one. "Ripe and full-meated."

"Oh yes," his wife murmured huskily.

The stranger eyed Malone challengingly. "That's quite a feat," Malone said. He held up his pouch. "Don't carry near that much seed with me. So I reckon one'll have to do." Digging into his much smaller sack, he removed a single seed.

The stranger smirked. "That's all you got left, friend? My bag's still near full."

"I don't much like to travel heavy." Carefully, Malone pushed the single seed into the soil, using one callused thumb to shove it deep. Then he stepped back and waited.

The tree that blossomed forth was no larger than any one of the dozen walnut trees that now blocked the stream from view. As soon as it reached its full growth, Hotchkiss approached to pick from a lower branch.

"Walnuts," he declared disappointedly as he cracked the shell with the butt of his knife. With the point of the blade, he pried out the contents, popped them into his mouth, and chewed reflectively. "No worse, but no better."

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"Pick another," Malone suggested.

Hotchkiss looked at him funny, but complied. It seemed that his eyes couldn't get any bigger than before, but they did. "Pecans." He stared wonderingly at Malone. "On the same tree?"

"Thought you'd be the kind who'd appreciate good nuts," Malone told him. "Why stop now?"

The young farmer picked some more. His delighted wife joined him. Together they sampled the tree's bounty.

"Peanuts . . . on a tree!"

"Chestnuts," his wife exclaimed. She displayed the rest of her pickings to the mountain man. "What are these, Mr. Malone?"

He examined the contents of her perfect hands. "The big curved ones are Brazil nuts. Little curved ones are cashews."

"What are cashews?" Hotchkiss asked.

"They don't come from around here, but they're good to eat," Malone told him. "Those big round ones are macadamias, from Australia." He peered up into the tree. "I reckon there's some up in there I don't rightly know myself."

The stranger walked right up to his taller opponent to search his face. "You're a very clever man, friend. Very clever indeed. But you're no farmer's friend. And whatever you be, I swear you can't match this."

He stepped back and took a seed the size of a peanut from his sack. It pulsed with a faint inner light of its own, as though a tiny heart were beating inside the hard outer covering. Instead of scattering it carelessly as he had the others, he planted this one very carefully. Malone thought the stranger whispered some words over it as he ground it into the soil with the heel of his boot. Then he stepped back.

From a red refulgent patch of earth, another tree emerged, its branches sagging under the mass of multihued fruit they carried. The trunk of the tree seemed permeated with that pale red glow, which did not diminish when the tree ceased growing. There were apples and oranges, lemons and limes and soursop, jackfruit and starfruit and litchi and rambutan; fruits that never should have grown in that dirt, in that country. It was a cornucopia of fruit sprung from a single unsuspecting square of soil.

Even Malone was impressed, and said so.

"Go on," said the stranger proudly, "taste some of it. Taste any of it."

The mountain man carefully scrutinized one of the groaning branches.

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He picked a couple of rambutan and began to peel them, the sugary white centers emerging from behind the spiny red outer husks. The stranger looked on intently as Malone put one fruit to his lips. Then he hesitated.

"You must be gettin' a mite hungry yourself, after so much hard work." He held out the other rambutan.

The stranger waved him off. "No, thank you, but I enjoyed a fine supper and am quite content."

"Oh go on," Malone urged him. "I dislike eatin' by meself."

Hotchkiss frowned at the stranger. "Is something wrong with the fruit?"

"No, of course not." The blond man hesitated, then took the proffered fruit. Eyes locked, the two men ate simultaneously.

"Can I have some, too?" Emma Hotchkiss asked coyly. "I'm not full at all. In fact, I'm just ever so positively empty inside." Malone smiled at her.

"Maybe later, ma'am. We need to make sure it's truly ripe."

"Oh, I think it is." She smiled up at him. "But if you're not sure, then I'll wait until you are."

"Pretty good," Malone said, tossing aside the nut that lay at the center of the fruit. He wiped his lips with the back of a huge, hairy hand. "You know your crops, Sam the farmer's friend, but I ain't so sure you know your soil. This hereabouts is soured fer sure, and not all the fruits and vegetables and grains that you or I could grow on it in a night will cure that."

The stranger did not hear. His face had acquired a faintly green glow itself. A hand went to his stomach as he turned to Hotchkiss.

"Are you all right, sir?" the young farmer inquired, alarmed.

"I am. Just a mite too much of my own bounty, I fear. Might your fine little community be home to a competent physician?"

Hotchkiss nodded. "Dr. Heinmann. Travels between towns hereabouts. He's at the hotel for another day, I think, but should be leaving tomorrow."

"Then I'd best hurry." Suddenly the stranger was running back toward the farmhouse, exhibiting more energy than at any time that night.

"What happened to him?" Hotchkiss asked.

Malone followed the stranger with his eyes as the man reached the house, mounted his steed, and urged it into a mad gallop toward town. Retching sounds drifted wistfully back over the fields toward them.

"I reckon he got too full of himself. He has a lot of knowledge, but ain't quite sure how to control it. Your land hereabouts is soured. With his

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kind of help, it'd grow you one fine crop this year and probably fail the next, mebbe forever. By which time the likes of Sam the farmer's friend would have harvested whatever he desired from this part of the world and moved on." He glanced in Emma Hotchkiss's direction, but rather than mark his point, she only gazed back at him invitingly, ignoring such inconveniences as admonitory implications.

Hotchkiss was crestfallen. "You're saying that the trouble's still in the ground, and that it can't be fixed? That all our efforts here are doomed to failure?"

"Oh no, I didn't say nothin' like that, Wil. The problem can be rectified by the application of an appropriate nitrogen-fixin' substance, not by seein' how many outrageous fruits and vegetables one man can grow in a night by trickery and deception."

"Nitro fix . . . ?" Hotchkiss frowned up at him. "What kind of talk is that?"

"Science, my young friend. The same science that makes the telegraph work and steam engines turn wheels. There's all kinds o' science stalking about the world, even among vegetables."

"Where do we get this kind of substance?"

"Wal now, it might take some time to gather what you need from certain islands I know, like the Galápagos, or certain holes in the ground, like in New Mexico, but seein' as how you folks have already had such a bad time of it and are so far down the road o' discouragement, I thought it best to attend to the problem as quickly as possible. So while we've been out here playin' farmer, your difficulties have already been attended to."

"Already? You mean the ground is fixed?"

"Yep," said Malone. "Won't grow you no already wined grapes or many-nut trees, but you'll do right well hereabouts with regular walnuts and grapes, wheat if you need it, and a bunch of other stuff I don't reckon you know much about yet. Like artichokes." He stroked his beard. "I reckon I'd try the oranges a mite farther south, though."

"But the soil, how did you put it right?"

Malone put a fatherly hand on the young farmer's shoulder. "Now, don't you worry yourself none about the hows here, son. Sometimes it's jest better to accept things than to question everything."

They walked back to the house, which seemed already to have taken on a cheerier, happier air. As they did so, Malone glanced toward the

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corral. Worthless and the mare had returned. It was difficult to tell which was worse winded, but it was plain to see that the stallion had been attending to business. No doubt he'd sprayed most of young Hotchkiss's property in addition to his mare.

How could Malone tell his host that a little unicorn seed invigorated everything it touched?

Emma Hotchkiss could certainly cook, he had to admit. She had changed, and wore a smile and a dress that revealed at least two rings of that three-ring circus whose presence he'd remarked upon earlier. Several of the acts repeatedly bumped up against Malone as she leaned over the table to serve the men. As always, her husband did not notice. He was too delighted, too thrilled by the knowledge that his farm had been saved, to note that his field was in danger.

After she slipped off to bed, leaving in her wake a trail of perfume and promise, the two men shared conversation and tobacco in front of the crackling fire.

"I can't thank you enough, Mr. Malone. My neighbors won't believe it."

"They will when your crops come up, son. I promise you that."

Hotchkiss regarded him curiously. "For a man who's fulfulled every promise he made, and vanquished the opposition to boot, you don't sound very content."

"I'm troubled, my young friend. 'Course, I'm always troubled, but I reckon that's my destiny. I'm not talkin' about those kinds of troubles, though. Jest the local ones.

"Fer example, if'n I were you, I wouldn't be entirely convinced that this was such a fine place to put down roots."

"But I thought you set the earth here to rights?"

"Oh, she's unsoured, that's certain, but whatever cursed this ground in the first place I ain't sure is entirely cured. It might cause problems somewhere down the line. I'm not sayin' it will fer you, understand, but it might fer your children, and your children's children. When you've put a few good years in, you might consider sellin' this property at a good profit and movin' further down into the valley, mebbee somewheres along the San Joaquin. Better water there anyways."

Hotchkiss was silent. "Well, sir, I cannot but take your advice, having seen what you've done here this night. I will certainly keep your words in mind."

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"That's not the only thing. There's more cursed hereabout than jest your land."

"More than the land? I'm afraid I don't follow you, Mr. Malone."

The mountain man nodded in the direction of the bedroom, the firelight deepening the shadows that were his face. "It's your Emma."

Hotchkiss gaped at him, then jerked around to follow his gaze. "Emma, cursed? Good God, Mr. Malone. By what? She seems well and healthy."

"She is that. But she's also tormented by the worst curse that can afflict any woman, Wil. That of boredom."

Hotchkiss frowned. "Boredom? But how could she be bored, Mr. Malone? There's so much to keep a woman busy on a farm: caring for the garden, washing, feeding the chickens and hogs, cooking, mending."

Malone coughed delicately into a closed fist the size and consistency of a small anvil. "I don't think you quite follow my reasoning, son. There's activity, and then there's boredom, and the two ain't necessarily mutually exclusive." He leaned forward, his eyes intent on those of the younger man, as if he were trying to communicate much more than mere words.

"She needs a change, Wil. She ain't the stay-on-the-farm-all-year type. You're a hard-workin' young feller, and I kin see that you're gonna do yourself proud with your farmin', make yourself some good money. Spend some of it on her. Don't just tell her you love her. Show her. Take her up to Frisco for a while. Tell her how beautiful she is. Give her little gifts and presents, and not jest for her birthday and holidays. The best time to give a woman something is when she ain't expectin' anything." He rose from the chair.

"Where are you going?" Hotchkiss asked numbly.

"Out to the stable. You'll be wanting the house to yourself."

"But I promised you. . . ."

"Never you mind what you promised me, son. Most beds are too soft for me anyhow. I'll sleep fine in the stable." He glanced toward the front door. "Need to keep an eye on Worthless anyways. Come springtime he don't always know how to slow himself down." He grinned. "Thinks he's still a colt."

"Wait!" Hotchkiss said suddenly. "What kind of presents should I give Emma? What kinds of gifts?"

"Don't need to be big things. Lots of times little'uns mean more to a woman." He donned his wolf's head, and Hotchkiss thought he saw tiny

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lights flare briefly again, though more likely it was the glow from the fire. "You might start with this."

He reached into a pocket and removed something that he handed to the young farmer. It was a small wooden sculpture, exquisitely detailed, of a man and a woman holding each other close, staring into one another's eyes. Some of the detail looked too fine to have been fashioned by human hand.

With a start, Hotchkiss recognized the piece of whittling Malone had been working on outside the hotel in San Jose when he and his fellow farmers had confronted him.

"I can't take this, sir."

Malone stood in the doorway, bending low to clear the jamb. "Sure you can, son. I jest gave it to you. Go on. She'll like it." Before Hotchkiss could protest further, Malone closed the door behind him.

The young farmer stood there, unnerved by the gift. Then he shrugged and carefully put out the fire, retiring to the bedroom. In the dim light, he failed to notice that the man and woman depicted in the sculpture were in the exact likeness of himself and his precious Emma.

The following morning, Emma Hotchkiss made Malone the best breakfast he'd enjoyed in some months; grits, toast, biscuits and gravy, bacon and eggs and homemade jam and sausage. She hovered close to her husband, the two of them exchanging little kisses and touches, and both wore expressions of great contentment and affection. The circus, Malone noted with satisfaction, had folded its tents, pulled up stakes, and left town.

Hotchkiss escorted him back into town, the two men chatting like old friends in the morning sunlight. Worthless all but trotted the entire distance. Malone gave him a couple of knowing kicks, which with great dignity he studiously ignored.

They walked into the general store, only to find a meeting already in progress. Faces turned in their direction as they entered, only to look quickly away.

Seated in the center of the group was the blond stranger. He was smiling. Evidently, the good Dr. Heinmann's ministrations had mollified his internal confusions.

"What is this?" Wil no longer sounded young and insecure. "What's going on here?"

"Well, Wil," said George Franklin as he slowly turned in his chair,

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"we were just finalizing our agreement with Sam here."

"But you can't do that." Hotchkiss started forward, only to be restrained by his much larger companion. "I mean," he said more quietly, "Mr. Malone here fixed my problems by himself last night. Now he's ready to do the same for the rest of you."

"We're sorry, Wil." Kinkaid was apologetic. "But we did have a prior agreement with Sam here. Whatever your Mr. Malone did last night was between you and him. The rest of us have made another arrangement."

The blond stranger held up a paper. "This here is a signed contract, all legal and irrevocable. Fifty dollars for fixing these fine folks' land. Which I will do."

"Pretty underhanded, running back here to have that drawn up when you knew Mr. Malone was tied up with his work out at my place," the young farmer exclaimed heatedly.

"Easy there, Wil." Malone gazed silently at the nervous faces of the farmers. "This how you folks want it?" No one had the guts to speak. The mountain man nodded knowingly. "All right, then. But I'm warnin' you to keep an eye on this feller. Some things he knows how to fix; other things I ain't so sure. T'other night his own handiwork made him sick. If you ain't careful, it might make you sick, too. Might make your land even sicker than it already is. I just want you to know that anything happens after I leave, any problems you have, tain't my fault. It's his."

Kincaid and Franklin exchanged a look. "We are prepared to deal with any adverse consequences, Mr. Malone, though we are confident there will be none. We are mature men, and we know what we are doing."

"Saving yourselves fifty dollars. That's what you're doing," Wil Hotchkiss muttered angrily.

"It's all right, son," Malone told him back out on the street. "Jest remember what I told you about considerin' that move."

"What did you mean when you said in there that he might make the land sicker?"

Malone lifted his gaze to the sunburned hills and fields that surrounded the town like a grassy sea. "I don't rightly know myself, Wil. That Sam's a right clever feller, but I think mebbee too clever by half. A little knowledge is a good thing, but a lot . . . well, you better know what you're doin', when you start playin' around with the earth." He clapped the young farmer on the shoulder, a friendly good-bye.

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"You take care o' yourself, young feller, and your good woman, too. Come later this summer, I think you're gonna come into a foal that might act a mite peculiar, but it'll be a good animal for you if you can learn to tolerate its eccentricities."

"I will bear that in mind, Mr. Malone, sir. And thank you." Searching a pocket, he found the double eagle he'd been carrying with him since yesterday. "It's only a part of what you're properly owed, but. . . ."

"Thank you, Wil." Malone accepted the twenty dollars. "Fair payment for services rendered." He mounted the four-legged massif that was his steed. "Give artichokes a try."

"I will, sir." Hotchkiss shouted after him as he rode south out of town, even as he wondered anew what the devil an artichoke was.

Inside the general store, the stranger was holding court, promising the small-minded, short-sighted men around him bounteous crops and enormous profits. He knew a lot, he did, but less than he thought.

"You heard what the mountain man said," Kinkaid told him.

The stranger smiled: relaxed, supremely self-assured. "Sure I heard, and it don't worry me none. Shouldn't worry none of you, neither. I know what I'm doin'. When I finish my work, your farms will be more prosperous than you've ever imagined. 'Course, there might be a slight recharge fee each planting season, but nothin' none of you won't be able to afford. A trifle compared to what you'll be making.

"As for any problems that come up, why, I'll gladly take the blame for them. You think, if I didn't have confidence in my skills, that I'd stick around? I know my responsibilities, gentlemen, and am prepared to discharge them to the fullest. So if anything untoward should occur hereabouts, let it be deemed my fault. My fault, gentlemen, or my name ain't Sam Andreas, Sam the farmer's friend."

Coming next month

"Gate of Faces" a compelling SF novelet by Ray Aldridge, "Her Wild Wild Eyes" by Brad Strickland, along with new tales by Bob Shaw, Kathe Koja and others. Watch for the April issue, on sale March 4. Or send the coupon on page 156.

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Esther Friesner's new story concerns an angry cobbler, his suffering wife and some elves who are, in the author's words, "definitely not Santa's helpers at work. I suppose that this story can be blamed on a childhood spent reading English *fairy tales, and you know how grim those can get."*

THE SHOEMAKER AND THE ELVES

By Esther M. Friesner

WHERE SHE WAS BRED was mountain, but where she wed was valley. Her mother said that this was best, for queer things were more likely to happen to a girl who lingered among the tall and silent upland forests, especially were she so fair as Mary. Better wed to a valley man, a village man, a man old enough to have a father's wisdom and strong enough to wrestle a good living from an honest trade. All this her mother said, and saw to settle it accordingly before she died.

Master Oliver was old enough to have fathered Mary; that was so. You could count the cobbler's years almost like a tree's, by the deep scowl lines gouging his ruddy face, by the wine-bottle circles ringing his small eyes. He was strong, too, though if not powerful enough to see a tavern sign and pass it by, then surely man enough to teach his little wife some strap-bought civility if she dared question him, or ask for a bit more money to run the house, or try to keep him from his spousal rights.

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He had been to the city when young, and said he could read. None in the village challenged this, though he was never seen in company with any book, profane or holy. Still, who could say he did not play the bookworm privily? What a man did behind his own closed doors was his affair alone. Shining Mary, too, knew letters, and the management of the pen, but gained no further measure of respect among the village women for this. She was mountain bred, after all, and who could say but that her accomplishments were not parcel of some long-sunk taint of Other blood, rather than scholarly industry? For mountain girls were often brought to bed of strange infants, got in stranger ways, especially those who wandered the higher forest alone.

No, you never knew with mountain folk.

Master Oliver knew enough to forbid his young bride any return to the mountains of her love. It was not that he feared she would run tale-bearing to her kinsmen — Is a lawful husband to be gainsaid at every turn by a jillflirt's caprice? Was he not in his rights to master howsomever the home he owned? — but that each hour she lost away from his hearth was that much work time wasted. He was a good shoemaker, when he worked at it, but no one could embroider like a woman. So Mary was kept by the fireside, her needle punching through the fine leather of other women's shoes. The small-point trail of sweet woodruff up the high-button side, the stitchery swirl of wild roses at the toe — these were as close as Master Oliver let her come to seeing those old friends of her woodland rambles.

Sometimes he gave her children's shoes to embroider, but not often. She would weep so, and spot the white leather, and no number of good, honest slaps to bring her to her senses would suffice to lesson her out of such foolishness.

For they had no children. This lack meant little to Mary's man. Two mouths were enough for an honest man to fill, and he always told his tavern friends that for every mother born, a wife died. At home, though, he turned to another song. Much as he deplored Mary's daft tears, Master Oliver never hesitated to charge their childlessness to her account. Her sin, her fault, maybe even the questionable purity of her mountain blood was at the bottom of it all. Hadn't he played the man's part well enough, often enough? Oh yes, she hastened to assure him, quite often enough. Well, then, it must be she. Only a passable wife, not even a real woman, just an earthen jug of barren dust; all the village knew that he was being

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saintly generous to keep her at so poor a rate of return. For her part, he told her, she was nowhere near aware enough of his condescension, nor sufficiently grateful for Master Oliver's charity and forbearance.

The years rolled, and the mountains sent down their snows, and the valley drank the chill meltwater that tingled on the tongue with a reflection of captured stars. Master Oliver continued to fill the taverns with tales of city life, but though his comrades heard him out and murmured admiration, they no longer brought him so many orders for new shoes nor asked him to repair the old. His stride was firmest on the path into the past, not the road home, and hands that shook so while framing a scene of lusty, laughing city women were no longer skilled for pounding out sturdy shoes on the iron last.

Chill rains fell out of an autumnal sky. Mary sat by the window, coaxing a little more light from an oil lamp whose twisty rag wick was little more than a thread. No fire burned in the hearth, nor would while money lacked to buy logs and kindling. Bread was but the memory of a childhood love. Mary did her fancywork on cloth now, for the shelves of the cobbler's shop fronting her small home were bare of leather, and mice had nibbled the wooden shoe pegs to dust.

Try she might and try she did to lay aside the money her embroidery garnered to buy new leather. Then at least there might have been material to hand if any villager turned fool enough to order shoes from a drunken cobbler. Try she did, yes, but Master Oliver had a disturbing talent for sensing when his undutiful wife was about to collect for her labors. Then a firm hand would fall on her shoulder, the blear of ale would whisk from his eyes, and he would march her up and down the village streets, taking charge of every copper that was due, bantering gallantly with the plump housewives about Mary's needless insistence on doing such work.

"What can I do, ladies?" He shrugged. "Who doesn't know the stubbornness of these mountain girls? If she would rather turn her time to these frivolities when the house is a horror and good cookery an afterthought, well —! I can't prevent her." He patted Mary's golden head. "My old mother always did say I was a fool with a bargain, but I'm honest enough to abide by my mistakes. I put a shingled roof above her head and a stone floor beneath her feet. She never went about so well clothed and fed and shod as this when she ran wild on the mountain, I swear! But it's never enough for her, ladies, never enough what I give her, and so she humiliates me by

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taking in piecework, just as if she were a crustless widow with a roil of children at her skirts and no man to tend to her wants."

And the ladies all agreed that it was a great shame Mary brought upon her husband. They might have stopped giving her any trade, but Master Oliver was quick to tell them of the fire storm he would suffer if she lost this petty pastime. Everyone knew these mountain girls were furies when thwarted, with tongues sharp enough to shave a man at fifty paces. So he pocketed Mary's pay, sampled the housewive's homemade fruit cordials, and when man and wife were home again, he cursed her for a lazy bitch because the tally was so low.

Rain pattered at the cracked glass. A mist hung about the street outside. By the lacking light of the oil lamp, Mary counted out the few coppers her man had left for her housekeeping. The rest were gone with him to the tavern. Over and over she passed the worn coins through her fingers, confirming what her eyes had first told her: Not enough. Oh, sufficient for tonight's loaf and a little meat, but more than meat and water must go into a stewpot.

Mary pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the window, and her cheeks burned with tears. She remembered the aroma of her mother's stews, spiced with herbs and vegetables culled not twenty paces from the back door. But that plot of fruitful earth was lost to her. The little scrap of garden she had tried to plant and keep here lay dead beneath the autumn rain. There had been no harvest, for one midsummer night, Master Oliver had come roaring home and trampled down the tender vines of peas and beans, hacked away the green tops of the young carrots so hard he broke the hoe.

Mary laid her palms to the pane. The storm clouds and autumn's early dusk had darkened the sky, yet it was still early for those who kept time by the tavern clock. Master Oliver would not be home for hours. She had time to go to market and buy her meat and bread at the hard valley prices, but there would be no coin left for vegetables. He would come home, wanting dinner, and not for the first time, she would claim to have no appetite, giving him her wretched share of the stew besides his own. Still he would snarl over the bowl, an ancient hunting hound forced to harry only helpless quarry. He would prove his teeth on her if he did not like the meal.

She shuddered and turned from the window. Her calloused hands

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scooped up the coins. If she must choose between his sure anger tonight or just the possibility of his wrath if he found her out, let it be the latter. Her shawl hung from a peg by the door. She cast it over her long blonde hair like a fey's glamour and went out into the rain.

Through the village streets, she fled like a felon, glancing nervously into every shadow for a potential betrayer. Swiftly, her ill-shod feet sought the mountain road. She burst past the boundaries of the town like a wild bird freed from the fowler's cage. Rain soaked through the torn sides of her shoes, but she was used to the cold.

No one saw her; no one stopped her. The basket on her arm swung wildly, making the coins in her little kidskin purse jingle. In the mountains there were wild greens, tender mushrooms, onions and tiny carrots, and all the forest's bounty for the taking, if a woman knew where to look. In the mountains, too, were folk readier to milk cows than coppers. A near bargain for bread and meat in the village would be a welcome and a warm chat in a mountain cabin, with a fair price to follow.

She did not go to any homestead where they were likely to know her or her kin. Delay to renew old acquaintance would be fatal; good fellowship and reunion must be kept at arm's length if she were to survive this deception. Her stealth kept her off the common track, skirting farms where once she had known laughter. The amber light of lanterns smiled vain invitation at her from every window; the distant whicker of a snugly stabled mountain pony was enough to wring her heart.

She found what she sought high up the mountain. On the higher slopes, the rain had faded to a mere sprinkle between the thick pines. The housewife was alone, her men gone out to work the hard fields. She did not bother to remove the nursing infant from her breast as she dealt with Mary. Good fresh bread from her own hearth and good fresh pork from recent slaughter soon weighed the basket down.

Mary saw that the woman was no older than herself in years — as if years were all that marked a woman's age! She asked Mary to stay, but there was only going. Her mind excused her haste with looming images of Master Oliver, and the need to gather potherbs before his return. Her heart told truth instead — the babe clinging to his mother's breast, the wide-eyed daughter holding fast to the young wife's skirts, every minute's sight of them a sliver razored from her soul — but she would not heed truth. With a gruff manner learned from curtness's master, she dallied

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only long enough for the other to advise her on the best and nearest woodland gleaning.

The young mother was of mountain blood and breed, thus plainspoken. She answered Mary's question to the point, but cried after as the shoemaker's wife set her foot on the lintel, "— yet I would not hunt there, sister! Near as it may be, fine as what grows there, I would not. Better a farther walk and harder harvest, for there are moon-cast shadows in the thickets of that glen when there's no moon in the sky, and sounds —" But Mary's ears were full of Master Oliver's bellowings, and the little girl's sweet prattle, and the baby's hush of milky breath. She did not hear the warning.

Of course she found the glen with ease, scampering down the mountain's flank with her girlhood's remembered nimbleness. She knew it without question when she found it, a lovely spot. The pines grew tall, no softer carpet in any lord's manor than their fallen needles. Silvery stones tumbled from the face of the mountain, all the day's earlier rain a bright rushing down their sides into the mossy pool at their feet. Here mushrooms grew, the yellowing clusters of galingale, and a bramble of late blackberries; and there beside a tumbled log, the stars of ransoms beckoned. All would make fine eating.

Mary was mountain bred. A digging stick to find and the will to use it were all she needed to fill her basket past the brim. As she knelt among the fallen pine needles, the smell of clean water and evergreen her blessing, she forgot for a time that she was Mistress Oliver. She was no more than Mary again — shining Mary, singing Mary, lighthearted Mary with all the world to please her, and glittering dreams to deck the path before her feet. Her heavy black village matron's shawl fell back, revealing the silken sunlight of her hair. An old mountain work song rose to her lips. Alone among the pines, she made music.

And music answered.

She dropped her stick, hands cold. The alien notes played on, a far, high piping that laced its way through the heavy branches like the flight of a tipsy bat. Mary's heart leaped to meet the music, lurched and fell painfully at every weird variation of the unsought melody. Prayers fled her. Master Oliver's blood-hot face was not monstrous enough a summoning to give her back command of her legs. She huddled over her basket and waited to die.

The music ceased. Her frozen mind could not at first comprehend the

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silence. A crone's raspy breath rattled from her lungs. Use returned to her fingers. She clutched at basket handle and shawl as she stumbled to her feet.

Mary. . . .

Moonlight where no moon could shine cast a ring of holding over her.

Mary. . . .

A breath with all the scented warmth of summer lifted the wisps of hair from her cheeks and touched her beating throat with a lover's lightness.

Mary, sweet Mary, bright Mary my queen. . . .

Shades whirled beneath the pine trees, little gusts of snow. Tall and silvered illusions whispered madness to her mind. Her sight darkened like the sky before a summer storm. She could not move, but she could fall. Something softer than a bed of pine needles met her as she fainted.

He was with her when she woke. Eyes golden green held her own, eyes pupilless, with no human hint of white to encircle their bright glow. But beyond those eyes, he was made as a man, young and tall and limber. His skin was whiter than the best cream, his hair the burnished russet of the forest floor. His right arm pillowed her head, and his left arm caressed her.

No further fear touched Mary. She knew him, and recognition exiled fear. Through the long mountain winters, her mother's house had never lacked for tales of the Other folk. With wonder on her lips, she dared return his touch. No floss was so satiny, no fire so warm.

Mary, my Mary, how is it that you've left the mountain! Mary, my heart, why have you soiled your beauty in the houses of men!

His words were like the memory of music, felt rather than heard. His mouth never moved to form them, but it parted well enough for kisses that were deep and fiery, making her bones thaw, her heart flame. His hands were soft and slim, but strong. He loosed her from her few poor tattered garments with as much reverence as if he served a princess on her wedding day. She could not feel the cold of falling night, nor the prickle of needles pressing against her skin. There was his presence, and the abyss, and nothing in between.

But when he would have claimed her, his desire-drowsy eyes flew open with a scream of direst pain. A gust of icy wind swept through the glen, bending the pine branches, breaking the tall stalks of galingale.

"Oh my love—!" she gasped, and stretched out her arms to bring him

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close to her again. But he was on his feet, a shimmer of blue writhing over his body. The radiance of his eyes crackled with dim lightnings.

How could I have been so mistaken! His thoughts throbbed. All the agony racking him set answering aches rolling between her temples. *My kind can always tell the unclaimed maid from the married woman. Mary, loved Mary, is it only now I see the wedding band on your finger! Why, then, did my seeking summon you! Why does every fiber of your being sing to me that you belong to no mortal man!*

"My dearest, you see truly; I am no man's. I may be married to a villager, but we are two separate souls. *Wife* is only his name for me, as other men name their dogs. Why must that drive you from my arms?" She raised them to him again, coaxing with the sweet sight of her pale nakedness.

He was unmoved. *Mountain born, mountain bred, mountain blood, and are you still so ignorant of the lore that rules my people!* Her head pulsed with his bitterness. *By sufferance you share our woods; by sufferance we share your world. So far and no farther are your folk or mine allowed to pass into the territory of the other. Mortal may be elfin-friend, yet never dance in our hidden halls without the loss of ages here above. Elf may aid mortal, but only undisturbed by interference. No man or maid of your kind or mine may bear away a mate from among the other race if there be any ties of love or liking or law to hold the chosen one to his world. The penalties are strict and inescapable, payable at once, in the skin. You are not for me, my lovesome Mary.*

Fierce sobs tore from her breast before the tears could come. The whole glen shuddered with her heartbreak. He knelt beside her again — only with friendship's comfort now — and sought to soothe her. Though she poured out all the foulness of her life for him, he was as powerless as before to change the order of the world.

But he had loved her, in the absolute, immediate, sudden-certain nature of Otherkind. Though centuries of life waited on his pleasure, he knew his heart's chosen on sight. If Mary had owned the art for reading the expression of eyes that were all light, she would have seen her anguish equally mirrored there. He could not let her go without some proof of his devotion.

Mary, lost Mary, we must part, but I may not entirely forsake you. Since I cannot wholly change your life, let me offer you what little I can to ease it. You will live poor no more, nor ever want for what money

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fetches. Your husband, too, shall live well, and perhaps the good life my kin and I will bring may soften his hand to you. And he whispered to her of what she must do and how it would be. Her eyes grew wide to hear.

"But — but how am I to buy you the leather to begin?" she asked. "Or the cord, or the shoe pegs? There is nothing in his workshop but webs."

The Other laid silence over her mouth with a kiss. That far he might go. *No questions. We shall provide. Do not interfere, and all will be well. Now go, before you tear me into the shreds of a soul.*

Mary went down the mountain slowly, her head a thunder of excitement, doubt, and bitter memories. She was late coming home, and Master Oliver beat her. The pain she felt in her flesh was a trifle. There was something dead and heavy filling her womb. Master Oliver saw how little effect his teaching had on his wife, so redoubled the lesson. When she lay weeping on their bed, he was satisfied.

THAT NIGHT a cold moon shone. Dead leaves rustled in the gutters, though no wind blew. Every limb an ache, Mary could not sleep. Master Oliver snored sated at her side. Before he had fallen away, he made sure to remind her that a husband has the right to have more than just a hot dinner waiting for him at day's end. Awake in her bed, she burned between two fires, but could turn neither one to ash. If anyone had offered her the choice of which of that day's embraces she would more gladly cast into oblivion, she would not have been able to say. As it was, she was condemned to remember.

She fell asleep two hours before dawn, to the sound of muted tapping from the workshop.

"Wife! Wife!" Master Oliver shook her awake to the day. Her cries of pain did not keep him from hauling her out of bed and dragging her by bruised and battered arms into the workshop. "Just see what has happened! It's a miracle!"

Three pairs of dainty shoes such as ladies love stood in a neat row on the cobbler's bench. So prettily made they were — soles joined to uppers with stitches nearly too fine to see — that they needed no further ornament or ostentation than the single row of smooth ivory buttons running up the sides.

Master Oliver dropped Mary's arms and approached the shoes with holy awe. He touched the first as if expecting contact to snatch either it or

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him to dwell among the angels. Nothing happened out of the ordinary, so he gathered the courage to pick it up.

"Ah!" Impatiently, he waved for her to join him and repeat his experiment. She balanced one delicate slipper on her palm. Her astonished gasp made him smile. "Ever feel the like, Mary?" He had not called her by her given name for time past memory. "Soft as gauze, yet tough as steel for wear, I'll wager. *That's* fine goods for you! That's more like the sort of material I was used to working with in the city." There could be no higher praise for anything in Master Oliver's life than that comparison.

"Husband, this is the miracle you called it. What shall we do?"

"Do?" The old scowl came back with the echo of her question. "Stupid cow, what do you think we're to do? Sell the shoes, of course. *And* for a high price!"

"But where they came from —"

"What's the difference?"

Mary's eyes stole to the windowsill and back before Master Oliver could mark the crockery saucer resting there. At midnight she had filled it with a little water, lacking anything better. It was empty now, payment taken, but Mary's spirit misgave her. The winter tales of Others had many endings: bright with gold, fair with flowers, red with blood. She was no longer so sure she wanted any part of this bargain.

"This is enchantment, Husband. What if the shoes carry some witchery?"

Master Oliver laughed and seized her chin in a twisting grasp. "This is *luck*, Mary. This is my just reward for all the evil I've had to suffer wrongly in my lifetime. A good man has his pay in the end, as my old mother always said. There's no witchery to that." In afterthought he added: "I'll sell the shoes at a distant market and use another name. A better price that way, and if anything's amiss with the merchandise, they can whistle for me."

That very day he did as he promised, and came home that night elated by how easily he'd sold the wonderful shoes. He did not go to the tavern to celebrate, and even smacked his lips over the stew Mary set before him for his dinner. She got some comfort from that — the sort of make-do happiness that comes from the abrupt absence of pain. The fatigue of his long market journey even gave her the extra boon of undisturbed sleep that night. Before she closed thankful eyes, she took the smallest of the coins

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he'd brought home, and purchased milk for the saucer from a sleepy neighbor.

The next morning there were three more pairs of shoes on the cobbler's bench; and the next, three more. Master Oliver soon earned enough to buy himself a sturdy horse, to make the market journey faster. The time saved allowed him to return to his tavern visits, though he soon gave up the old village haunts for similar places in the market town. Too many questions were being asked among his old cronies. Mary knew better than most how little her man stomached questions.

There was money, and then there was money to spare. Mary filled the saucer with cream from her own milk cow, byred comfortably in the trim outbuilding Master Oliver ordered built behind the house. On the same plot where once his wife had struggled to grow greens to eat, he now made her a gift of blooming roses. The shoemaker added to his drunkard's fat the more substantial paunch of a man of means, girdled with satin and hung with gold. He dressed himself too much like a lord, and decked Mary in gaudy dresses that ill-suited her, parading her through the village like a prized doll. Women who had once met Mary at their doorsills with fancy-work now insisted she come into the parlor. They called her sister, and Master Oliver made certain that Mary responded in kind. In her name he accepted their every invitation.

If he did not hire her a maidservant, it was not through niggardliness. He spared no expense to enhance himself in the sight of the village. A girl to cook and clean would have been the ultimate symbol of Master Oliver's new stature — more than that, if she were pretty and willing.

But she would also be a strange pair of eyes beneath his roof; spying eyes. Fortune liked prying questions as little as did Master Oliver. The shoemaker staunchly believed that she was a highbred horse who would spook and fly at any unheralded change along her familiar paths. Disturb one golden brick of the palace Fortune had reared for him, and all would come tumbling down into a heap of rubble. Though a fine townhouse on the village square beckoned, he did not dare to move out of the enchantment-blessed shop, nor to admit anyone to his home who had not been there when the miracle began.

In the end, this began to chafe him.

"*Damn* you!" Master Oliver's fist crashed among the silver and crystal of his dining table, making porcelain plates leap. A goblet turned on its

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side, ruby wine dyeing the linen. Over the lees of a feast, he glowered at his wife.

"Husband—?"

Master Oliver was out of his chair and around to her end of the table before she thought it possible. By candlelight his shadow capered across the newly painted walls like a black tumblebug. A tickle of flame danced over his gold-ringed hand the instant before he brought it hard across her face. Shock was outmatched by pain. Her tears glittered more brightly than the diamond collar at her throat.

"Would I'd married a woman of wit," Master Oliver rumbled, the injured party. "A good wife would have had the brains to find us a way out of our present difficulties, but you—! A leech. A parasite. A tick to sink her head in my flesh and drain me dry, giving nothing in return. Well? Do you deny it?"

Mary wept on and did not answer. He gave her other cheek a matching blow, for he hated a sullen woman. When she had breath back, she managed to say, "Husband, what do you mean? We have no difficulties to escape: What have I—?"

"Do we not?" The old hound barked at her with scorn. "Three pairs of shoes a day!" he cried aloud. "Three miserly pairs of shoes. Sometimes made for men, with ivory buckles; and sometimes for women, with cunningly carved buttons; and sometimes for babes, with twisted leather lacings — but always three. No more."

"No less, Husband," Mary ventured. "And faithfully there, each day. Surely—"

"*I say it is not enough!*" He swept her measure of wine from before her. The goblet bounced on the thick carpet, leaving a spreading stain before it shattered on the fieldstone floor. "By no means enough to bring me sufficient money for my needs. How am I to put by anything worth saving out of so little? Three pairs of shoes, no more a day, and I am bound captive to this miserable place like any lackwit by a chain made of three foul pairs of shoes!" He howled his sorrow to the ceiling while Mary trembled, wondering how she would end up paying for life's supposed injustice to Master Oliver.

Too soon his wails stopped. He was staring at her, eyes like embers of purest hate. "You've a hand in this, Wife, or I'm an infant. Mountain blood runs thick with Other blood, black with evil witcheries. Tell me

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"Tell me, or I swear I'll see for myself the color witch blood runs."

why it must always be three pairs of shoes, no more. Tell me, or I swear I'll see for myself the color witch blood runs."

His hand fell to cover the hilt of Mary's knife, still before her on the table.

Frantic, Mary temporized: "Husband, if I have the power, I will tell you gladly, but — first tell me what it might be you lack that selling three pairs of fine shoes a day can't buy?"

"What? Why, you mindless wench, can't you know? The city! The city, high and glorious! If only I could make more profit, I would have enough to leave this hole and never look back. I'd be a prince in a city palace, and the city women bowing to my will all around me, numberless and more beautiful than all your fetid roses." His hand tightened on the knife's hilt. "But I am unfairly denied what should be mine. I must have enough miracle shoes to sell so that I leave here with a lifetime's wages. Can I do that? No! For storm or sun, all I find in the mornings are three meager pairs of shoes!"

Mary's head swam. A dream took hold of her eyes. It took her time to know it, for dreams had become strangers to her. *The city! Master Oliver gone to the city, and the city women, and no mention of bringing her there. Oh, the blessed city!* And in that instant of vision, Mary vowed to give her husband his desire.

"Husband, your wish is mine." She spoke so sincerely that Master Oliver dropped the knife, bewildered. Sweetly, she went on: "I will help you however I may, eagerly, but a man of your intelligence should have no need of my poor help. Let us try to fathom the mind of our miracle. Think: If you still made shoes, what would keep you from making more than just three pairs at a time?"

Master Oliver loathed questions, but here was one worth puzzling out. He frowned in concentration. "If I had no time to make more —"

"But miracles are never bound by time."

"If I had lost interest —"

"But we find the shoes daily in your shop."

"If the pay were not to my liking —"

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Mary said nothing, and her husband soon shook aside that theory without her. "I am still as good a man as when the miracle first found me. The payment remains unchanged. Well! The only sane reason left to keep someone from making more than three pairs of shoes would be if he lacked sufficient leather and pegs, cording and trim for more." Master Oliver smacked a fist into his palm. "Our miracle *shall* have more! Even the angels must ultimately rely upon man's ingenuity. I shall go to market tomorrow and buy as much of the best shoe leather as cash and credit can. Tomorrow night I'll leave it on the workbench, and may the world turn upside down if I don't find at least three *dozen* pairs of shoes when day next comes."

That night, as she set out the saucer of cream on the windowsill, Mary breathed a prayer and a petition across the snowy surface. She turned then, and for the first time in many empty months, saw the golden green eyes of her heart's longing.

He kissed her, then lifted her smartly dressed curls with his fingertips. *Is your life sweeter now, sweetest Mary! Have I kept my word!*

She hung her head, willing him not to hear the lie when she said, "Yes; very sweet."

Then why this sinful greed!

A whisper: "Not mine." Louder: "But it may save me."

He heard neither. *Have you forgotten everything! Elf may help mortal so long as mortals keep their place and do not interfere. Learn your limits; cross none of our borders. The number of shoes we make for you is fixed; the material* must *be only of our procuring. Oh Mary, life and magic are more closely linked than lovers, bound by a tie you would blanch to know. Do not seek to learn it! Stay away!*

She pleaded with him, to no good end. She begged for his favor, to increase the count of shoes by just a single pair, a sop to keep her man at bay. He shook his head, and flinched away from her stricken eyes. *It is fixed,* he told her. *If you knew, you would rejoice that we can only find the wherewithal to make but three pairs a night.* And he was gone.

Mary slept that night in the total exhaustion of spirit that is dreamless and merciful. Silent next morn, she watched her husband ride away to set his plan in motion. She knew Master Oliver too well to risk dissuading him. All day she pondered over which tack she might take, what action of hers might safely deter him from his declared course. She paced the house;

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she paced the garden. Futilely, her little milk cow bawled for some attention to her aching udders. Mary's roses drooped for want of water under the summer sun.

At last she saw no greater saving than to take the cream saucer from the windowsill and smash it. She took the fragments far from home, dropping them onto the town midden. When she returned from this errand, she found Master Oliver unloading two heavy bales from the back of a newly-bought baggage mule.

"This will do it," he announced, puffing as he wrestled the bundles into the shop. "Yes, this will please them!" He tugged and dragged first one then the other to lean against the workbench. He grinned at his wife.

Then he saw the sill.

"*Where is it?*" He had her by the neck, shaking her until her head snapped back and forth. "Little stinking mountain slut, where is the saucer for cream?"

He threw her down, loomed above her with hands whose fingers curled in wistful want of her throat. She mewed in terror of him. "Husband, it was old and cracked, only a silly mountain custom. A miracle does not need —"

He did not strike the excuses from her mouth; that was more frightening than all the blows he had dealt her before. Very soft, very small, an unnaturally bridled voice came from Master Oliver: "You think I don't know." His face was slack and smooth, only the life of the eyes to show it was a living man's. "But truth is mine. I have spoken with men in the market towns who know of such things. This is magic, not miracle; elfin magic comes to serve me. When I first told them in that distant tavern, it was safe. They never knew my true name, or whence I came. I could revel in my miraculous fortune openly. But they knew it was better than a miracle. They told me it was elves at work by night, good and biddable spirits whose favor is bought with a bit of milk or cream. You knew, too, didn't you, Mary? You mouthed 'miracle' to deceive me. The very day they told me, I looked all around this shop. I found the saucer on the sill. Every night you've filled it, and every night they come and make me three scant pairs of shoes."

He shook his head sadly. "This is unjust malice on your part, Mary, to bring me just so much good luck, and no more. But now that I have found the way to make the good sprites serve me better, you seek to drive them off. They will not like your high-handed ways any more than I do. They

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will see the rich stuff I have brought for them to work with their art, and the basin of best cream I'll bring to them with my own hands, and then there will be nothing I ask that they'll deny."

He picked up his dusty cobbler's mallet. "I don't need you anymore, Mary."

She cast crossed arms over her head as the mallet came down once, and twice, and again. It struck her hard, but not so hard as Master Oliver fancied. Still, hard enough. The first blow made her scream, the second shattered bone, and the force of the third stroke threw her headfirst against the iron-legged workbench. Bloodflowers black and red fluttered over her sight, and the world was lost.

She opened her eyes again to a darkness full of shadows. Shapes teased names from her reeling mind as she slowly understood where she was. That was the workbench towering above her, and that double bulk near her head was the leather, and that square of light on high was the window, and that shining circle balanced on the sill was a silver basin full of cream, and that black mountain was her man.

Mary lay very still. Mountain blood could tell time by the moon and stars, but from where she lay, there was no seeing more than a vague wash of their light at the window. She did not dare to stir, hardly took the shallowest breath without fear. She could hear Master Oliver breathing heavily. Whether he slept or woke, she could not risk testing.

Time crept through the shadows, and the lights moved across the windowpane. Other lights moved as well. Golden green lights glided through the darkened workshop — not two, but eight in all. Four tall and stately creatures who brought their own brilliance before them stood in sudden congress around the cobbler's bench. They never troubled themselves to look down at the little woman's body crumpled beside them; not even he that would have been her love.

Their speech was low, harsh where Mary had dreamed it would be musical. She was well placed to gaze at their feet and see how the talons curved from what was formed midway between eagle's gripe and lion's paw. A breath of cold emanated from them, a dreadful chill that translated all of silver's iciest sheen from the visible realm into the tangible. Its wintry gust shot up her spine and left it paralyzed with frost. Trembling, she rolled her eyes to see their faces.

She never knew why the scream would not come. Either Master Oliver

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had had his wish and she was now a dead woman, else there were horrors that badger-burrowed themselves too deeply into the body to allow even sound to escape the compass of their claws.

Oh, the faces of the Others! Their features had been cut from a blade wielded by the hand of nothing holy, yet the sum of eyes and ears, nose, mouth, and chin alone was not enough to account for Mary's birth-strangled terror. It was not what the faces of the Others looked like, but what their essence was: shining cool masks of gaunt brutality without a warming trace of anger to make it humanly comprehensible; ravenous hunger without the passion of appetite; strength that spoke to the eye and said, *My will shall be answered, nor any mortal conceit of pity or mercy or compassion blunt my purpose. This is the law, and law is all.* They were faces of fact without mitigation, faces where love had never been, even in a dream.

All save his. Pawed and taloned like the rest, he no longer moved in man's guise. Yet Mary's flesh and spirit still yearned for him from that deepest core of self where soul and body seem to twine and touch. The same faith that had opened Mary's sleeping heart to his desire in that mountain glen now taught her as surely that his Otherness was no impediment, the softer look that set him apart from his companions was no sham. Strong and haughty, mighty and alien as any of his kindred, still he was not frightful. Love had stolen that grim honor from him forever.

He was nigh; she need not fear. She closed her eyes to gather back her brave childhood heart. When she opened them again, she found that she could look at her beloved's companions and not think of death.

She watched them as they set to their night's work, ignoring Master Oliver's snore-heavy bulk as well as her own small presence. They passed the basin of cream from lip to lip, once around, leaving it empty. She could not say why, but somehow she knew that there had been exact partition of its contents, a precise accounting to the final drop. Payment taken, one of their number hoisted a bright red sack onto the workbench. Its dye was an eerie richness that even a starless night could not rob of hue. Its master spilled out what it held, while the other three closed their hands around shoemaker's tools suddenly *there* in the middle air and moonlight.

Clatter and grind, thrust and pull and stitch, knife scraping and gouging away, sinew complaining as the satiny needle dragged it through the starlit measure of hide. Mary heard the elves at work, saw their fingers fly.

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No pleasure in the task showed on their faces. One whittled pretty buckles from an ivory block, and one nipped delicate patterns from a leathery rook, and one pounded snowy pegs into the soles of a man's shoes, and the one she loved twisted and plaited a length of dark brown cording fine.

No music wove itself around the tempo that their mallets marked; they did not sing or hum or whistle. They did not even speak to one another. The work itself was not soundless, but they added nothing to the tedious obligation of the task. Not much noise, the cut and cobble and stitchery of elfin shoes; only enough to rouse Master Oliver.

Mary heard his voice before she saw him stir. "Good — good evening, gentle ones." An initial quaver in his words was quickly gone. He came across the floorboards of the shop to welcome them, casting a glance to the sill and beaming with satisfaction to see that the cream was gone.

"Well, well, my friends, this is a fortunate meeting, and one I've long desired." After their austere silence, the shoemaker's words came as an obscene intrusion. "And was this night's drink to your liking? I could fetch you a better. I've often thought you might prefer good ale instead, else both ale and cream. You've only to ask, and I'll oblige. What are friends for, eh? My home is yours, and all my poor hospitality. You honor me with the favor of your presence. If there's anything in my power to do—"

Silence: only the carver's *tsik-tsik-tsik* of yellow blade on yellow ivory. Eight willow-leaf eyes with neither black to anchor nor white to hold them to this world fixed themselves on the cobbler.

His brandy-muddled mind still had some droplet of sense to dredge up. It found him wisdom enough to feel ill at ease before the visitors. Master Oliver dammed back his garrulous camaraderie for a little while. He rocked from foot to foot, as if testing which way the air would part most easily should he decide to bolt. *Tsik-tsik-tsik* from the workbench, softer and softer, like a dying insect trapped within stone walls. Eight eyes, golden green, burning in the darkness, and the shoemaker's rasping breath, and the smothered beating of a woman's heart in a stillness patient enough for the innermost ear to hear a whisper from the outermost realm of God.

Master Oliver was not a man born to bear too heavy a burden for too long. Fold after fold of the velvet silence dropped onto his shoulders, bowing them until he must cast it off or flee. Mary heard him suck in breath like a man just pulled from the blackest witch's well. He flung

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aside the spell of quiet with the clamor of a bravo wager-pressed to pass midnight in a house of bones.

This time when he spoke, he was all crisp business: "Tongue-shy, are you? See here, good fellows, you've no need to be ashamed. I know why you've been leaving me so little of your excellent work each night. I know it must gall you to come here and take so much from me, only to give such miserly goods in trade. I don't blame you; I sympathize. We artisans understand each other. How frustrated you must feel to be kept back from producing as many shoes as your skill allows! It's not as if you're lazy. So here —"

He passed between a pair of them as if they were his old tavern gossips, and bent to tug out a corner of one leather bale from beneath the workbench. Mary held her breath as his face came near enough for her to smell his chilling sweat; but for Master Oliver, she was not there. He smoothed the hide over his hand for their inspection. "I've spent my own money to buy you this. It's the finest I could find, and there'll be more of it tomorrow night. Now nothing can stop you —"

Man. . . . A rusty iron lych-gate swung wide, without a human hand to open the graveyard way. Words moaned in Mary's mind; echoed in Master Oliver's, to judge by how he startled and clapped hands to his skull. *Man of earth, you trespass on the borders.*

Which one of the four elves spoke so? Mary could not tell. She knew only that it was not her love. Her humanity had tainted him with tenderness. This voice was pure Other, bred clean of mortal feeling as the kiss of a sword.

But Master Oliver dropped his hands at last and blinked dully into four pairs of glowing eyes. "Trespass?" he repeated in patent disbelief. "In my own shop?" He gave a good-natured laugh. "You've a strange hand for a jest, my friends. Now let us speak of serious matters. Will this bale give you enough material to make me boots? Ladies' or gentlemen's, it doesn't matter. It would be good if I could offer some variety in market, and the city folk like to dress well when they ride."

Now the silence was absolute. The yellow knife lay on the workbench beside the half-done buckle. The four tall visitors rose at once, limbs of the same body, and walked past Master Oliver for the door.

"Stop!" Mary saw her husband lunge after them. His hand flashed out to grab one by the arm. All four turned, though Master Oliver held fast to

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only one. "Where do you think you're going? You can't leave! The shoes aren't done." They said nothing, so he pursued: "The three pairs you leave me every night."

They are done, Man; all the shoes that we shall ever make for you are done.

All the shoes that we can ever make must be made from material procured from one source alone. That is the law.

You have interfered; you have intruded. All bargains end when any part of them is broken.

The penalties are strict and inescapable, payable at once, in —

"But it's not fair!" Master Oliver's voice climbed to a dizzying whine. "Speak to me of law, do you? Then what's your word for swindler? Take my cream and leave without making good, as you've always done before — *there's* foul dealing!"

Man, it is as it is, and so it must be. It was agreed that we might work unseen. You have broken the bargain.

"The bargain was none of my making; I never knew the terms of it. It was my wife devised it, making it to limits meant to drive me mad." Master Oliver began to snivel. "Must I still suffer for her cruelty?"

The Others drew nearer to the shoemaker as he blubbered on of how everyone, fey and mortal, used his good nature to their own advantage. Interest touched their faces, mild enough, yet on such perfectly blank canvases, the change blazed bright as a burning home. Their thoughts buzzed in the brain like a field full of locusts.

His wife!

The woman.

What woman!

There. Mary saw her beloved gesture toward her as if she were no more than a third bale of shoeleather. For all that, she heard a splinter of pain in the single word he said.

Is that his wife!

The cause of our first summoning!

One of the elfin faces passed in a comet's arc over Mary's sight. She held her eyes very still. *Yes, it is she; I know the blood.*

And I.

And I.

And I. But see! The blood is spilled; the bones are broken.

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Ah! Other faces flashed above her briefly. A slender finger lanced pain from the trickling cut above her temple. She willed herself not to wince, unsure of whether even her beloved's presence would suffice to save her if they guessed she lived. Soon enough they left her to the dark.

This is a great deed, truly.

Fearless, the deed; dreading nothing, the doer.

Oh, I scent a courage in this that comes near to touching on our own.

But for us there is a natural cause for so great valor, so small fear. In mortal men—

How few, how pitiful few ever do approach the grandeur of this accomplishment!

In the shadows by the workbench, Mary's eyes grew wide despite all sense that she must cling to the illusion of death. Her broken bones and battered body were turned from a crime against the helpless to a heroic monument when the elves spoke of it. Courage, did they say? Valor and fearlessness besides? Her wounds throbbed; the side of her head was searing where their pryings had poked alive the embers of pain. Certainly it must be the pain that cast its own peculiar spell over her, not letting her hear the Others' words rightly.

"Valor?" Master Oliver was in no pain, and he had heard them, too. Eagerly, he asked, "Does it please you, dear friends, to see how I have dealt with a disobedient woman?"

Ah. . . . A fading breath of purest satisfaction.

More than you will know. So very rare, in your kind—

Rare, yes; if he is telling us the truth.

Mary's lover said nothing.

"But it is the truth! Yes, I'll swear to it, if you'll tell me what oaths you believe. Wait, I'll prove it." Master Oliver let go the elf's arm and stumbled to his knees in their midst, feeling over the floor for his mallet. The moon was kind to him; he found it quickly and rose to show off the bloody relic, proud as a child who brings his mother spring's first flowers.

The elves crowded around him until he was an islet of night afloat in the ocean of their cold fire. Birch-twig fingers touched the blood; flinty lips pulled back as black tongues tasted it. So avid were the elves, so rollicking in the joy of fresh discovery, that they did not notice if one of their number did not fight for his share and missed the treat entirely.

The taste is truth enough for me.

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And me.

"Does it please you, lads?" Master Oliver's face was flushed with happiness, a taverner whose autumn ale has just passed muster. "Does this mean" — he dropped his voice to its most insinuating key — "that I'm forgiven? Will you stay and make the three promised pairs of shoes for me after all?"

Elfin laughter scraped the plastered walls.

Three! Only three!

Oh no, Man. For once we shall not be bound to only three.

Master Oliver beamed until Mary thought she would see his face split with joy. "Bless you, friends. I'll just help you with leather—" He moved for the bales by the workbench.

This time it was an elfin hand that tightened on a mortal arm.

We use only that which we come by ourselves. That is our bond.

Another hand came to grasp Master Oliver's other arm, and another voice to echo in the mind: *We gather for our craft only that material which is of no use to either elf or mortal. That is our constraint.*

The third Other stood before the pinioned shoemaker, and the yellow knife was in his hands. He slit open Master Oliver's costly shirt in a slash from throat to navel. A thin line of blood mirrored the blade's passage. The cobbler's eyes seemed to stand out from his head.

"My lords, you cannot mean to murder me!" he cried.

Murder! the carver queried, for the foreign word left him honestly bewildered.

"In mercy's name, you cannot say that you will have my skin for your shoe leather, my bones for your buttons?' An absurd rising note of hope made Master Oliver's words all the more pitiful.

The carver regarded him as one might a talking dog. *Human skin! For shoes as sweet as those that come from our hands!*

His right-hand mate added, *Man, did you not mark us! We take only what elf or mortal otherwise would waste. Our craft is cobbling, but our art is thrift; we use what is superfluous. No, you need your skin.*

The third spoke: *Common bones for our buttons! But bones dissolve too easily to dust. All arts are bounded by their several borders that all artisans must respect. Betray ours by condescending to use something so perishable as ordinary human skin and bone! The grave devours these in ten years' time; our art must be eternal. Master Oliver, I thought you*

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cherished a greater opinion of your fellow craftsmen! He laughed, and for sheer relief the shoemaker began to laugh with him.

No one was more surprised than Master Oliver when the yellow knife entered his throat, and his soul came chittering out into the cold air of death.

Mary's lover was waiting for it with the soft red bag. He chivied the shoemaker's soul safely home and pulled the drawstrings tight. *This, on the other hand,* he said, *is nothing you have ever used.*

Human skin, said the carver, absently licking off his blade. *Imagine. Ah well, bring the sack over here. We've a bit more to do if we mean to make an end of it this night.*

And Mary was witness to the weird dexterity that elfin hands can have when it is a matter of flaying the skin and flensing the substance from the bones of a human soul. She watched, unable to close her eyes or turn her head away, as magic tanned scrolled skin into tender leather, and art turned bone into a patter of buttons and buckles and pegs. She watched as her lover twirled the sinews of Master Oliver's dry and forfeit soul into the lacings that bind the shoes together, and at last came to see why he had told her to be so very grateful that in all the wide world, his kin could not find the makings for more than three pairs of shoes a night.

For you see, most folk do have need of their souls. Even the elves know this, though they themselves have none. And if they choose to name it courage for a mortal to act as if he were born as soulless as they, it is only their way. Poor things, knowing no better, they are not to blame.

The pain rushed up to overwhelm her then. A deeper black covered her eyes just as the first thread of dawning laid itself across the silver lip of the basin on the sill. The last sight she had was of four pairs of pretty shoes being counted out atop the workbench by the elves. The last thought she recalled having before the brightness and the horror died was: *Whether I live or die, by love or law or liking, at least now I am free.*

Green and sweet the air that welcomed her alive. Tender with the nodding boughs of pines, the window that waited for her first sight on awakening. The bed beneath her was clean and simple, made of lashed logs with a summer-straw ticking. The russet-haired man who sat at the bed's side, holding her hand where it peeped from the sling, was as fine and strong as any who ever wrestled a living from the uplands.

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"Mary. . . ." He spoke her name aloud as humans do, but she heard it with her heart.

Their firstborn was a green-eyed girl who had a curiously nimble way with a needle. Where she was bred was mountain, and by her mother's vow, there she was wed also. Even so, the valley whispered that there were young men aplenty who would have dared her wooing. So lovely she was, and so high-hearted, that they might have bent all their powers to make her mistress of a manor, a mansion, a palace.

So they might have done, but for this: never from birth until world's end did any scrap of shoe leather touch her feet. And what city man would abide such wildness in a wife?

But every man knows that they have queer ways in the mountains.

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Here is a superior sf story about bike racing, of all things. Its author is an assistant professor of English at the University of Mississippi. His fiction and articles have appeared in Punch, Shenandoah, The Village Voice *and* Cosmopolitan.

Tour de France

By David Galef

DAY 10: MY LEGS feel like putty on the climb up d'Aubisque; my lungs feel as if they're rubbing together. But the pack is over a minute behind, probably hurting worse than I am. Except for Mercier, who for some reason didn't come away with me — Mercier, who stomped everyone in the Superbagnères last year. I respect Mercier — despise him, I mean — with his clipped French commands to his Klik team: Broc, LeScalle, and that little shit Riscau who's always leading out and then cleverly dying. All working for their glorious leader, who I hope is pumping his heart out in this altitude.

I broke away at the first steep incline, at Eaux Bonnes, figuring if I didn't go then, the Klik team would control it to the finish. My own team, Xtra, has a few *domestiques* who'd die for me, but they're not such hot climbers, so what else could I do? To break with Mercier and then battle it out for the last hundred yards, that was my original idea. Only, when I looked back, he wasn't on my wheel — I couldn't see him at all.

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And I felt strong and thought what the hell.

Time bonus at the next checkpoint and finish at the top, but this goddamn grade is killing me. I'm grinding my lowest gear — 42-21, but it's too late to switch wheels, and anyway I don't see the support vehicle — where the hell are they? The crowds are out, all right, a lot of them crying, "Brent!", which comes out in French as something like, "Bra!" Only, some of them seem to be looking ahead rather than back at me. And some of the Frogs are shouting, "Mercier! Mercier!" — which you have to expect, but I don't have to like it, and I don't. A few crowd so close I can feel their breath on me, as if they were trying to blow me backward. I have a sudden vision of me lofted into the clouds, like the NewsSport helicopter that keeps chopping overhead, only all silent and floating.

I hear a fat horn behind me; it's the Xtra van trying to come through, with the manager leaning out the window like a balcony scene in a play. He's shouting something and pointing at his watch. But the crowd won't pull back, and the van gets swallowed up, or something — I can't look back, or I'll never make it. The grade has leveled out some, or maybe I just feel a bit stronger. There's one last impossible climb right near the top, though — I remember that from the route map we studied. It's coming. Right now.

Suddenly the pavement turns into a wall. I've got to do catty-corner across the road to avoid falling over. On the left is this crazy old guy in a red beret who mouths something at me — I don't know; it's not French, maybe Basque — maybe it's a whammy he puts on me, because I don't remember what happens next. When I open my eyes again, I'm about a hundred yards farther up, nearing the finish. There's a big crowd cheering like mad, but again I get the feeling that they're not paying any attention to me. I've got fifty feet to the line, when I see Mercier — dismounting, disappearing in a flurry of hands. *Ahead of me.* I was going to raise my hands as I finished, and now all I can do is turn it into a disgusted shrug. The Xtra van is there already, the manager pointing his fat cigar at me.

I don't think I'll bother describing the rest of this day. I was upset, that's all — anyone would be. If *monsieur le manager* has a mouse under his eye tomorrow, he's got no one to blame but himself. And still nobody's bothered to explain what happened. Least of all Mercier. All I got was a Gallic smile that I can still see tonight, lighting up the cheap white cur-

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tains of the hotel room. That bastard is 17 seconds up on me. That's *my time* he stole. Somehow I've got to get it back.

DAY 11: Another ascent, this one not as steep, but long as a prison sentence. 147 K to the top of Le Cambasque, then a 90-kph descent that makes you wonder if your insurance policy is all paid up. Lovely scenery in Cauterets; only, all I can think about is keeping my twitching hands off the brakes. 4 K before the crest, a group of five riders went off the front, but no biggies were in it, so no one chased. Mercier was a bike length ahead of me in the pack, warming his hands on his yellow jersey, flanked by his henchmen. 17 seconds. If I'd gone with the group, Mercier and his crew would have been on my tail in a second, so I'm just as well where I am.

Which is nowhere, really. In half an hour, the descent has flattened out, the pack has caught the lead group, and it's going to be a mass sprint. The Dutchman Van Eyck takes it from the left, led out by a teammate. Mercier is fourth, and I pick up sixth. Most everyone gets the same time, though, which means it's still 17 seconds. The oddest thing: as Mercier revs up for the finish, I could swear he's pedaling backward.

DAY 12: Long leg: 249 K from Toulouse to Montpellier, through all those vineyards. The smell of rotten grapes is pungent enough to half-knock you off your bike — so this is why peasants smell so bad. It's one of those days where the pack has completely closed ranks — maybe to guard against the smell — turned into one giant machine, rolling along in an 85-inch gear. Inside, where speed is relative, there's almost no sense of motion, barely a breeze. This is an illusion, I know — we're really going 40 kph — but it almost feels effortless.

At the 100-K mark, someone up front blows the cover off the illusion. You can feel it down to the fifth echelon, where I'm flanked by Xtras: a sudden tensing — man off the front. This is it: it must be Mercier trying to solidify his lead. I fight my way through the ranks, going around the Colombians, almost going through Rourke, the Irish miracle who now wears that funny Samsung jersey. Riders on the right see me stomping through, and pick up the pace themselves, and by the time I get to the front, we're pushing it.

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Only, there's no one off the front. We're in a stretch where a cyclist would be visible for over a mile, and all I see is road. Now that I've blasted through, one of the Belgians flies by me, with Rourke on his wheel. Their legs are so synchronized I could swear they're riding a tandem, but I don't have time to think about this, because the two of them pull out a whole string of riders. There's Thurlow with his eight-ball-helmet, and the Human Fly with his double Bolex eye gear close behind. The Fly flashes by, *but his tires aren't hitting the pavement.* I blink: the Fly is two bike lengths in front of me, back on the ground. Where the hell is Mercier?

The race has really opened up: I shift into my 106 and start pounding. We're zooming past the fields now, as if all those vines were dashing away from us. O.K., it's a trick of the eye, but I can't stop thinking about what I saw, and it doesn't help that the rider in front of me in the peloton is dressed in a snorkel suit — I blink, and he's gone. A rumor starts that two Klik teammates are off the front; they left early and now have over a minute on the pack. I don't know whether to believe them or not — I don't know what to believe anymore.

The race ends in another mass sprint, with the same time for almost everyone. The winner, a rider for Kas, came by me from nowhere — I mean nowhere. Or maybe I just didn't see him. I'm exhausted, and all I want to do is crawl under bed; I mean into bed. Tomorrow is a time trial from Gap to Orières-Merlette. Good: that means I'll be alone.

DAY 13: The riders start at 9:00 A.M., pushed off at two-minute intervals. Since I'm second overall, I leave second to last: I see them go one by one, following a gradually steepening grade to Les Garnands, at which point the going gets monstrous. This is something the Colombians excel at, riding up cliffs, but the only Café d'Oro jersey that close to me is Pedro Gado, 2:34 down. I should be O.K.

Around 10:00, a light rain begins to fall, and by the time I go off at 10:34, the route is too slick to take real chances. But I can still stomp on it, keeping just right of the yellow line, trying to catch up to Rourke, in front of me. 17, 17, 17 is all I can think about — I even see myself stopping by the roadside to take down Mercier as he comes by after me. Lasso him, shoot his bike out from under him. Got to shut all that out and just pedal. Halfway up the first hill, I already know I'm going to put in a good time: my legs feel like steel, pumping strong.

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I look up, and that's when I see Rourke in a tuck, skimming *down* the hill on the other side of the road divider. He passes me in a flash of yellow Samsung, and suddenly my legs don't feel so great. I honestly feel like getting off the goddamn bike and sitting down to figure this out. No time, no time — I lower my head and power up the rest of the hill, almost skidding out at the first plateau.

When the next three riders fly by in the opposite direction, I don't even look up. I almost plow into a gasoline truck on the last ascent; only, it fades out as I'm about to hit. I mean, it goddamn disappears. All this whatever-the-hell-it-is costs me time. 15, 16, 17 seconds? Keep your head down, damn it.

I finish in 53:12, so far the third-fastest time. Mercier matches my time exactly. Keeps the gap. When the Xtra manager puts me into a hotel room that night with number 17 on the door, I make him change my room.

DAYS 14, 15, 16: Stages going from Gap to Briançon, l'Alpe d'Huez, Villards-de-Lans. At the start of a long haul up Col du Lautaret, Rourke pioneers a getaway with a rider in a black skinsuit, who chucks away his water bottle for weight. A half-minute later, he takes off his helmet and throws it away. Then it's a brake lever, I swear — then a few other pieces, including a seat. The last thing I see is him twisting off his head while Rourke pedals on in front, and all I can see is two hunched-over backs. The two of them have opened a gap of about a hundred yards, but no one even seems to look up. They widen the gap, and in under five minutes, they vanish completely. After the race, a teammate tells me that Rourke didn't start that morning because of a stomach virus.

I'm not sleeping well anymore. I've gotten rid of my travel clock because the ticking bothered me. I threw it out the window, in fact — the second hand got stuck on 17 after the hour. Breakfast barely stays on my stomach over the rolling hills that morning, and maybe someone put something in my coffee. The most frightening moment is when I look up and the pack is nowhere to be seen: just a blank road in front of me, twisting like a snake. There's no one else — no one, and I have to ride out the road until the end somewhere up ahead. When I see two Kas riders pedaling furiously *without moving*, on a flatbed truck by my side — that's when I can't take it. I shut my eyes and count. At 17, I open them, and

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the pack is all around me again. As if nothing had happened — and nothing has happened, and nothing did happen for that rest of the day.

Mercier actually gets away for several kilometers near the end, and I figure at least we'll see a different time now — it's the closeness that makes it so unbearable. But then those two Kas riders lead a break group to head him off before the finish, and the break group pulls along a chase group of fifteen riders, and we do catch up to Mercier, and we all finish together, and that leaves Mercier 17 seconds up on me, goddamn it. Mercier isn't even pushing it that hard when we catch him, as if he expects to be caught, even 1 K from the line, and he just hooks himself to our wheels.

The 16th leg, I deliberately drop behind, only to have my Xtra buddies pick me up and tow me back to center row. How can I explain what I'm trying to do? — suddenly I'm like a novice Tour rider, dying on the hills and hoping desperately for a flat or mechanical trouble, so I can retire without shame. I think of crashing myself out, but just as I get the idea, there's a real crash in front: two, then five, then seven riders down on an oil slick that has no business being there. Riders brake, a few more go over, and the front takes quick advantage of the gap. I don't even think — instantly, I pull up on the left shoulder, which is dirt but ridable, following a few other riders who managed to swerve; and as soon as we're clear, we start hammering. The front group is only a bit up the road; we bridge it easily enough, then I look around and see Mercier on my tail.

"*Dix-sept,*" he whispers as his long black bike passes mine. He brushes my bike ever so slightly, and that's when I think I blacked out.

DAY 17: I'm the only rider on the line when the starting gun goes off. The gray sky is like a giant cave I'm pedaling into, and an Alpine wind from nowhere moves down my neck. I'm in my underwear, hunched over the bars, staring at the flickering horizon when the road bites its own tail and turns into a loop. There's a figure up ahead, vague in the gathering darkness, his long shadow gaining on him. I recognize myself riding backward, defeating the clock — but even as I pass by, a rider appears on the horizon line. It's Mercier, I can see, even though I know nothing else about him; it's Mercier who's the rider, and I'm the shadow, shortening and lengthening but always attached behind, me, number 17, in this unbearably lonely race.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

ALL FOUR STANZAS

WHEN I was going to college, the United States was not yet out of the Great Depression, and I knew that I was not going to get a job after I graduated in 1939. The only thing I could do was to go on to graduate work, obtain some advanced degrees, and hope that the situation would have improved by the time I was through.

Now the problem was this: In what subject was I to get my Ph.D. (assuming I could be smart enough to get it and could find the money for tuition — for in those days there was very little in the way of grants to help out the impoverished)?

I was hung up between history and chemistry. I thought I could handle either one, but there was no question in my mind that I was more interested in history.

However, practical reasoning entered the field. I said to myself, "If I get my degree in history, then the chances are that if I get a job at all, I will get one in some small college, far away from my beloved city of New York, and that I will be working for a mere pittance with almost no possibility for advancement. On the other hand" (I continued saying to myself) "if I get my Ph.D. in chemistry, I may get a job with a large research firm for an ample salary with lots of room for advancement and with a chance, even, of winning a Nobel Prize, since I am so brilliant a person."

So I went for chemistry, and eventually, after a four-year delay because of World War II, I obtained my Ph.D. in chemistry in 1948.

The result? I went to work in 1949 as an instructor in biochemistry in a small medical school, far away from my beloved city of New York. I was working for a mere pittance and with no possibility of advancement. (Nor, I quickly realized, was there any chance at all that I would come closer than a light-year

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or two to a Nobel Prize.)

As I frequently say: "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, roughhew them how we will." (Hamlet said that also, and he may even have said it first.)

Chemistry was a big flop in another way, too. I really didn't like it and I was no good at it (except for being able to learn an encyclopedia of stuff about it, entirely because I can learn an encyclopedia of stuff about anything). What's more, as time went on, I grew less and less interested in it and, eventually, in 1958, I was fired simply because I was so uninterested in it that I refused to do any research. (I didn't mind teaching and writing books about it — I loved that.)

Of course, by that time I had another career, that of writing. In fact, my writing career began even while I was in college, when I was deciding what to do with myself — history or chemistry. Becoming a professional writer was a third option, but one that I didn't consider for even a split-second.

At the time I made my decision, I had sold a story or two, but never in my wildest imaginings could I possibly have believed I would ever do more than make occasional pin-money out of those stories.

And to tell you the truth, for a long time, I never did more than that. By the time I began my work at the medical school, I had written 68 stories and sold 60 of them in the course of eleven years. That was not too bad considering that the major part of my time had to be spent in my father's candy store, or at my graduate studies, or at a wartime job. However, in all that time, my total earnings for all eleven years amounted to $7700.

After I had been at work at the medical school for half a year, my first novel, *Pebble in the Sky*, was published, to be followed soon by others, and royalties started coming in; but even at the time I was fired in 1958, my literary earnings amounted to only $15,000 a year, enough to keep me going for a while in the absence of a job, but not enough to make me comfortable. (By that time, I had a wife and two children to support, too — and I was middle-aged.)

Now let's go back in time, to the point when I was first thinking about writing. Again, I had two choices. What I *really* wanted to write was historical fiction. I wanted to write a new kind of "Three Musketeers." The only trouble was that that would mean research. I would have to spend at least three years doing research in order that I might spend one year writing, and I didn't want to do that. I just *couldn't* do that. I wanted to *write*, not sit around taking notes.

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The alternative was science fiction. That required research, too, for I had to know science. But I already knew science thoroughly, and besides I could make up science of the future — so I began to write science fiction, and as you all know I did pretty well.

But only pretty well. What was it that made me rich and famous? I'll tell you. As I continued to write science fiction, the urge to write historical fiction continued to gnaw away at me, and the impossibility of spending enormous time at research continued to keep me from doing anything about it — until a brilliant thought occurred to me, a thought that was at once encouraged by the great editor, John W. Campbell, Jr.

Why should I not write historical fiction of the future? I would deal with a social system, with politics, with economic crises, with everything that is to be found in history, except that it would all take place in the future and I would make it up. I wouldn't have to do any research.

Therefore, I began writing my *Foundation* novels, and my *Robot* novels, and, in due course, I became rich and famous.

Twice I had shoved history, my one great love, to one side, and despite that, it was history, in the end, that made me. I repeat, "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." (Is it possible Hamlet stole that from me?)

Once I got to the point where I was so well known that I was able to write what I wanted to write in full knowledge that it would be published, I switched to non-fiction, writing books not only on science but on history. I wrote nearly twenty books of history for young adults — on Egypt, Greece, Rome (two volumes), the Dark Ages, Canaan, Constantinople, the United States (four volumes), and so on. Even my science books and essays were strong on historical detail, as all of you know.

I had to stop my histories when Doubleday insisted that I return to science fiction novels, but not entirely.

For instance, I wrote a 450,000-word history of science, year by year, from the earliest times, and it was published by Harper's in October 1989, as *Asimov's Chronology of Science and Discovery*, and it was well-received, too. However, though Harper suggested that for each year I add a footnote as to what was happening in the world outside science at that time, I did it so enthusiastically that the book would have been more like 750,000 words long. Harper's couldn't manage that, and

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they trimmed most of the straight history away.

Annoyed, I then proceeded to write another 450,000-word book, this time of straight history, period by period, country by country, and had more fun than you could possibly imagine. I did it without a contract, out of love alone, and showed it to Harper Collins (new name) only after it was all done. It will be published by them in 1991 under the title *Asimov's Chronology of the World.*

And, as you all know, I occasionally write straight history even in this column, which is ordinarily devoted to science essays, because the Noble Editor never interferes with my little quirks. And I will do so now.

I am not one of your professional patriots, you must understand. I am not a flag-waver (I don't even own a flag) and I eschew nationalism. I'm a globalist, who believes that human beings should not divide themselves into any divisions less than "human being." Let everyone be merely different facets of an overriding humanity.

However, even the best of us have our weaknesses, and I have one — I am crazy, absolutely nuts, about our national anthem. The words are difficult, the tune is almost impossible, but I sing it frequently when I'm taking my shower — *all four stanzas* — with as much power and emotion as I can possibly manage. And it shakes me up every time.

It bothers me no end, then, that hardly any American can sing the tune, hardly any American knows the words even to the first stanza, and hardly any American cares. They'll wave the flag assiduously, but they won't sing the song that celebrates the flag. And they don't know the absolutely thrilling story behind it. When they want to sing something they think of as patriotic, they sing Irving Berlin's "God Bless America," with words and tune as trite as you can imagine.

In fact, most national anthems are hymns, slow and stately and sleep-provoking. The only two anthems, beside our own, that I can think of as blood-stirring, are the French "Marseillaise" and the old Soviet "Internationale" (which they have replaced with something that is incredibly dull). But *our* national anthem takes first place, and easily.

I was once asked to entertain a luncheon club I belong to called "The Dutch Treat Club." I was given only a few hours notice, since it was well known I required no preparation. Taking my life in my hands, I announced I was going to sing all four stanzas of our national anthem. This was greeted with loud groans, and one member rose to close the

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door to the kitchen, where the noise of dishes and cutlery was loud and distracting.

"Thanks, Herb," I said.

"That's all right," he said. "It was at the request of the kitchen staff."

I then explained the background of the anthem and sang all four stanzas, and let me tell you that those Dutch Treaters had never heard it before — or never listened, anyway. When I was done, I got a standing ovation and cheer upon cheer. It was not me, it was the anthem.

Then a couple of weeks ago, Roseanne Barr of television shrieked the anthem before the beginning of a baseball game and was booed. I was hurt. The anthem should not be sung as a publicity stunt, and the public should not boo, when they themselves know nothing about it.

On August 1, 1990, I was at the Rensselaerville Institute in upstate New York, conducting my 18th annual seminar. I seized the opportunity to tell them the story of the anthem and to sing all four stanzas. And *again* there was a wild ovation and prolonged applause. Again, it was the anthem and not me.

So now let me tell *you* the story of how it came to be written.

In 1812, the United States went to war with Great Britain over the matter of the freedom of the seas. We were in the right. For two years, we held the British off even though we were still a rather weak country and Great Britain was a strong one.

The reason we held them off was that Great Britain was in a life-and-death struggle with the French Emperor Napoleon and had little time or breath to fight another war across three thousand miles of ocean. In fact, just at the time that the United States declared war, Napoleon marched off to invade Russia; and if he won, as everyone expected him to, he would control all of Europe and Great Britain would find itself alone and isolated in opposition to the Emperor. It was no time for her to be involved in an American war, and if the United States had been more patient and if communications across the ocean had been faster, Great Britain would have given in to American demands in time to prevent what was really an unnecessary war.

American land forces did very poorly, the only competent military officer we had being Winfield Scott. At sea, we did well. American ships and American seamen proved better, ship by ship, then the British, to the world's surprise (and especially to Great Britain's). We also won a battle on Lake Erie in 1813, when the American commander, Oliver Hazard Perry, using ships he

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had had built on the spot for the purpose sent the famous message, "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

However, the weight of the British navy beat down our ships eventually, and the United States was under a tightening blockade. New England, particularly, was hard-hit economically and it threatened secession.

Meanwhile, Napoleon was beaten in Russia and in 1814 was forced to abdicate. Great Britain could now turn its attention to the United States, and it organized a three-pronged attack on the country. The northern prong was to come down Lake Champlain toward New York to cut off disaffected New England. The southern prong was to go up the Mississippi to take New Orleans and to paralyze the west. The central prong, the most important, was to head for the mid-Atlantic and take Baltimore, the greatest port south of New York.

If Baltimore was taken, the nation, which still hugged the Atlantic coast for the most part, would be split in two. New England would certainly secede, and the United States would have to sue for peace, and it might well be a Draconian peace for Great Britain was very annoyed at the United States for distracting it in its fight against Napoleon. (The British asked the Duke of Wellington to lead the assault, but he refused.)

The north and south prongs might succeed or fail; they were not crucial (and in the end, each failed). It was the central prong that counted. On its success or failure rested the death or life of the United States.

The British reached the American coast and, on August 24, 1814, they took Washington. President James Madison and the rest of the government fled. The British then burned the public buildings including the Executive Mansion. It wasn't much of a fire and it didn't do much damage; nor was there any looting. Later on, the Executive Mansion was painted white to hide the scorch marks, and it has been known as "the White House" ever since.

Washington didn't count, though. It was a little shantytown of no importance except that it housed the government, so that it had symbolic value. The British ships then moved up Chesapeake Bay toward Baltimore, their real objective. On September 12, 1814, they arrived, and they found 13,000 men in Fort McHenry, whose guns controlled the harbor. If the British wished to take Baltimore they would have to silence those guns and take Fort McHenry.

On one of the British ships was

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an aged physician who had been captured in Washington and who had been brought along, for some reason, as a prisoner of war. An American lawyer in Baltimore, Francis Scott Key, who was a friend of the physician, came to the ship to try to negotiate his release. The British captain was quite willing, but it was now the night of September 13-14, and the bombardment of Fort McHenry was about to start. They could not be released till the bombardment was over.

Key and his physician friend had to wait through the night. They saw the American flag flying over Fort McHenry as twilight deepened and night fell. Through the night, they heard the burstings of bombs and saw the red glare of rockets, and while that was going on, they knew that the Fort was still resisting and the American flag was still flying. But then, toward morning, the bombardment ceased and a dread silence fell.

There were two possibilities. Either Fort McHenry had surrendered and the British flag now flew above it, or the bombardment had been a failure and had been stopped and the American flag still flew over the Fort. If it was the former, the United States might well be through as a nation; if the latter, it would survive.

But which was it? As dawn began to brighten the eastern sky, Key stared out the porthole trying to see which flag was flying over the Fort. Bedridden and unable to look for himself, the physician asked over and over again, "Can you see the flag? Can you see the flag?"

After it was all over, Francis Key wrote a four-stanza poem telling the events of the night. It was published in newspapers on September 20 and it swept the nation. It was noted that the words fit an old drinking tune called "To Anacreon in Heaven," and it was sung to that (a difficult tune with an uncomfortably large range). Key called the poem "The Defense of Fort McHenry," but, for obvious reasons, it quickly became known as "The Star-Spangled Banner." Eventually, in 1931, Congress officially declared it to be the national anthem of the United States, and a flag flies over Francis Scott Key's grave, day and night, though ordinarily the flag is not allowed to fly at night.

Now that you know the story, here are the words to the first stanza, and how I wish I could sing it to you. I don't have the best voice in the world, but it is adequate, considering my age, and I sing it (believe me) with a wealth of emotion.

It is the old doctor speaking from his bed, and here is what he is asking Key:

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Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light,

What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming!

Whose broad stripes and bright stars, through the perilous fight,

O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming!

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,

Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.

O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

"Ramparts," in case you don't know, are the walls or other elevations that surround a fort to help protect the personnel within.

This first stanza only asks the question. It is the second stanza that gives the answer, and it goes as follows:

On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,

Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,

What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,

As it fitfully blows, now conceals, now discloses!

Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,

In full glory reflected now shines on the stream:

'Tis the star spangled banner! O long may it wave

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

"The towering steep" is, again, the ramparts. Obviously, the bombardment has failed, and Fort McHenry remains in American hands with the American flag still flying. The British fleet can do nothing now but sail away, their mission a failure, so the United States survives.

In the third stanza, Key allows himself to gloat over the American triumph and to shout abuse at the British enemy. It is not a very nice thing to do in cold blood, but Key, in the immediate aftermath of the bombardment was in no mood not to be cold-blooded.

However, the enemy are the British, and during World War II, when the British were our staunchest allies against a new and far more hideous enemy, it seemed that this third stanza was unnecessary, and it was removed from the anthem. However, I know it, and I am foolish enough to want to share the gloating, so here it is:

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And where is that band who so vauntingly swore

That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion

A home and a country should leave us no more!

Their blood has wiped out their foul footsteps' pollution.

No refuge could save the hireling and slave

From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:

And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

That leaves the fourth stanza, which is a pious hope for the future and which has the atmosphere of a hymn at last. It should, to my way of thinking, be sung more slowly than the other three and with even deeper feeling. Here it is:

Oh! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand

Between their loved homes and the war's desolation!

Blest with victory and peace, may the heaven-rescued land

Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.

Then conquer we must, while our cause it is just,

And this be our motto: "In God is our trust."

And the star-spangled banner forever shall wave

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

The fourth stanza as I've given it here is the way I sing it. I have taken the liberty of making two small changes from the way the song appears in the reference books and, presumably then, the way that Key wrote it.

In the fourth line, Key wrote, "Then conquer we must, for our cause it is just." Key was writing about the War of 1812, when, as I believe, our cause *was* just, but I am not ready to assume that our cause is always just. The United States is as capable of fighting an unjust war as any other nation is, although I earnestly hope it doesn't do so often.

The Mexican War was an unjust war, a naked war of aggression, a war to fasten slavery on Texas after Mexico had freed the slaves there and to seize territory to which we had no real right. But we won every battle just the same, established slavery in Texas, and took the entire southwest. The Spanish-

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American War was not particularly just, either.

The southern states of the Union, after seceding to form the Confederate States of America, stood between their loved homes and the war's desolation and did so with magnificient bravery for four years, but lost in the end and (in my opinion) rightly so, for they fought for slavery.

The Vietnam War (again in my opinion) was an unjust war, for we travelled 6000 miles to take part in a civil war that was not really our business and held no threat whatever to our vital interests. The old "domino theory" was just a fraud used to justify what could not really be justified. And we lost, as we should have.

But now (as I write) Iraq has invaded Kuwait and taken it over. This was unjustified aggression and *does* affect American vital interests, for Iraq intends to control the world's oil supply to its own advantage. If we take measured action, I will consider our cause to be just.

Let me go on. The other change I have made is in the next to the last line where Key apparently repeated that the star-spangled banner "in triumph shall wave." I don't think that the third and forth stanzas should end equally. I want the end of each stanza to represent a new and higher climax, so I replaced the last "in triumph" with "forever."

When I sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," I don't try for vocal tricks, which I don't have the voice or the technique for, never having had even a day's training in voice. I try only to enunciate carefully so that the audience hears every word without fail.

Nevertheless, when I sing that last stanza, I do try one little trick. I linger over the "forever" and make my voice louder and even more emotional and I can feel the audience respond to that.

I sang all four stanzas in public only twice, but each time it was a memorable experience for me, and, I believe, for the audience as well. Now I do it for a third time, in print only, and without the additional dimension of my voice (such as it is).

I can only hope that you get a bit of what the national anthem means to me and that you will look at it with new eyes, and listen to it, the next time you have a chance, with new ears.

And don't let them take it away and substitute "God Bless America," for goodness sake.

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Delia Sherman wrote "The Maid on the Shore," (October 1987) and "Miss Carstairs and the Merman," (January 1989), both fantasies with a sea-going background. "Land's End" is about a seaman who finds himself keeper of a lighthouse and discovers that living ashore does not necessarily mean being safe ashore.

Land's End

By Delia Sherman

THE LAND'S END Light flashed out into the pale gray dawn. Forty-second beam. Twenty-second eclipse.

Aboard the clipper *White Goddess*, the lookout shouted, "Land ho!" The men of the watch raised a hoarse cheer, which did not penetrate to the second mate's cabin, where Joshua Saltree dozed and woke and dozed again.

The sleeping was better than the waking, for the pain wasn't so troublesome when he was asleep, nor the dead weight of his leg, wrapped and tied like a broken spar. He groaned in protest when the ship's surgeon woke him to give him a dose of laudanum and the news that land was in sight.

"We'll make port by noon. Captain's going to look after you." Dr. Coffin's voice was dry as a ship's biscuit. "He's that grateful. See you're grateful back, Joshua Saltree; that's all I have to say."

Grateful? Saltree couldn't think why. The laudanum eased the pain some, but slowed his mind and his tongue more. He wanted to tell Dr. Coffin that Joshua Saltree wasn't dependent on any man, that he had a

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place to go and a few dollars laid by. But all he could get out was, "Rooming house."

Dr. Coffin laughed. "Mrs. Peabody's a sight too busy to nurse a man hurt bad as you are," he said. "Drink up."

"Don't hurt," Saltree protested, but he drank the bitter stuff down, and a moment later, or maybe half a day, he opened his eyes to find the captain and Dr. Coffin hanging over him like he was lying at the bottom of a well.

"Well, lad," said the captain heartily. "Time to go ashore."

Saltree tried to sit up, found himself prevented by the weight of his leg and Dr. Coffin's hand on his shoulder. "Damn young fool," the surgeon snapped. "Bones're near sticking out your shin, and you want to walk ashore. Try it and be damned to you, but don't be surprised if you wake up one morning with no leg at all."

"It's splintered; no, s-splinted, Devil take it."

Captain Mayne sighed louder than he needed to. "You'll be carried on a litter from here to my house. . . ."

A woman's voice finished the sentence: "And that's an order, mister."

"Mary!" Captain Mayne's teeth flashed through his beard, and he turned away from the berth as fast as his bulk and the narrow cabin would let him.

"Seth." A woman's white hands slid around the captain's neck and pulled down his head. Saltree closed his eyes in shame and almost drifted off again, but a cool touch on his forehead brought him around.

Mrs. Mayne was bending over him, smiling. "Well, Mr. Saltree," she said. "This is a fine state for a sailor to be in."

Saltree frowned at her and feebly twitched his hand away from the tickling fringe of her shawl. He should be looking down at her, not up, should be saluting her from the rigging or standing by while the bo'sun piped her aboard, not lying here useless as a torn sail. She was a pretty woman — or had been, twenty years ago. Saltree smiled. A very pretty woman. And he and the captain were the only men aboard who'd seen her without her corsets.

That wasn't quite true. The whole crew had seen her bare bosom, but most of them hadn't the first notion that the *White Goddess*'s figurehead was the spitting image of the captain's lady. Oh, the carver had given the figurehead greeny brown hair and draped a fancy white sheet under her round, high breasts. But anyone looking close at her face would see

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Mrs. Mayne's straight nose and dark, long-lidded eyes. Stuck out under the bowsprit as she was, hardly anyone'd notice. But he'd noticed.

On calm days he used to scramble out the jib guys and stare out over the sea with one arm around the Goddess's sun-warm shoulders. He liked listening to the thutter of the bow over the swell, and watching the water glitter and foam under the keel. Ahead, always ahead, were ocean, weather, unknown shores, and he liked the way she breasted them with her carved lips parted and smiling. Why was she frowning now? Saltree moaned and closed his eyes.

After that, time passed in a blur of pain, heat, fear, and strange dreams. From time to time, Saltree was dimly aware of lying propped in a wide bed in a large room fitted with windows and curtains and gentle hands that brought him water and tended to his needs. But mostly he swam a pathless ocean, buffeted by storm. Lightning pulsed; sharks looked at him hungrily out of the eyes of dead sailors and rolled to snap at his feet. Salt water clogged the air, crushed his chest so that he gasped and flailed. A ship loomed — at her prow the White Goddess, decked out in seaweed. Her face was shadowed; her naked breasts rose and fell with the ship's breathing; her eyes streamed salt tears.

"Man overboard!" Saltree shouted; and she reached down her wooden arms to him. Sometimes he caught her fingers — slick and cool as varnished wood — and sometimes he did not, but in either case he always woke wheezing and coughing and retching like a man hauled in from drowning.

It was deep night when finally he opened his eyes to see a fire burning in the grate, and a woman sewing by a shaded lamp. He felt light-headed, and all his limbs were limp as rope yarn. A glass and a pitcher stood on a table nearby, with a brown bottle, a spoon, and a tin basin.

"Thirsty," he said, and was startled to hear how rusty his voice sounded.

The woman got up and came to the bed, her skirts hushing. "I'm not surprised to hear it, Joshua Saltree, for you've been sweating like a pig all night." She touched her hand against his forehead before pouring a glass of water and holding it to his lips. "The fever's nearly gone. You'll sleep quieter now."

Saltree swallowed the water gratefully. The woman busied herself plumping the pillows and smoothing the sheets. As she moved around

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the bed, the firelight fell on her face: dark, long-lidded eyes above a straight nose. His heart began to race.

"Goddess?"

"Don't try to talk now. You've had pneumonia and ship fever and I don't know what all else, and very nearly died. You're in Captain Mayne's house, and I'm Mrs. Mayne, as you'll remember just fine when you're feeling better. Go to sleep now. That's right. Sleep."

The next time Saltree woke up, Captain Mayne sat by the bed, sucking on an empty pipe and regarding him gravely. "Glad to see you back with us, my lad," he said.

"The *Goddess*?"

"She's up in dry dock, getting overhauled as good as new, if not better. A new mainmast's the heaviest expense, but eight members of the Pioneer Mining Association of Auburn're taking passage to San Francisco at fifty dollars a head, so she'll pay for her repairs and more soon enough. Owner's glad we brought her home at all, and he's real grateful to you in particular, as well he should be."

Saltree frowned. That's not what he meant. A broad hand gripped his arm, lying helpless on the white counterpane. "Don't you remember the storm?" asked Captain Mayne kindly. "Well, well, that's no loss to you. Never you worry, lad; the *Goddess* is safe and sound. You sleep now."

Once the fever was gone, Saltree was not long mending. The *White Goddess* had made port on the second of May. By the end of the month, Saltree could hobble from the bed to the window to the fireplace and back again; in the second week of June, he asked respectfully whether he better not be moving on.

"You've been dreadful kind — kinder than there's any call for," he said awkwardly, fearing to seem ungrateful.

"Nonsense," said Captain Mayne. "We're glad to have you, Mrs. Mayne and I. You mayn't remember going aloft with Tom Harris when the mainmast started to crack, but I do. The pair of you saved my ship, lad, for which I'm grateful; and my hide, for which Mrs. Mayne is grateful. Now Tom's dead and gone: we can't show him we're grateful. So let's hear no more of you leaving, at least not until you've got someplace better'n Mrs. Peabody's Rooming House to leave to."

What could Saltree do but thank him and work out his restlessness in

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learning to walk again. His leg had healed twisted and gaunt. It bore him, with the help of two sticks, and Dr. Coffin promised he'd be able to dispense with at least one of them in time. But it would keep him off a ship, except perhaps as steward or ship's cook — a comedown in the world, and no mistake.

As the spring days passed, despair gathered over him like a thunderhead. To be a cripple, only twenty-five years old and condemned to live ashore like an old man. It hardly bore thinking on. Mornings, when he pulled his pants over his twisted leg and his shirt over arms wasted by fever, Saltree ground his teeth and envied Tom Harris from the bottom of his heart.

Mrs. Mayne did her best to amuse him, and Saltree knew she meant it kindly. But whenever he saw her approaching with her hands folded around a fat black Bible, such rage swelled his breast that he liked to have burst from the force of it. Her motherly smile, her knitting, the hint of a double chin overlapping her lace collar — all were wormwood and gall to him.

Saltree didn't know why he should have taken so strongly against Mrs. Mayne, who'd nursed him like a mother. All he knew was that he didn't like being beholden, and he didn't know how he could stop being beholden, and what with one thing and another, he began to look near as peaked as he had when he was knocking at death's door.

Mary Mayne told her husband she feared Mr. Saltree might be sickening again.

Captain Mayne shook his head. "I doubt it's his body, my dear. It's hard on the lad, being land-bound at his age with no prospect of shipping out again."

"You'd think he'd be glad to be safe ashore and quit of storms."

"Saltree, well, Saltree's a queer bird. A fine seaman, but a queer bird nonetheless. He likes climbing masts, and he fair loves storms. The higher the sea, the better he's pleased; and the nearer he comes to death, the more he laughs. Tom Harris and he were a fine pair of fools, racing up the mainmast when anybody with an eye in his head could see she was cracked. But if they hadn't managed to cut loose the topgallant and trim the storm sails, we'd've run slap bingo into Bermuda Island." Seth Mayne sighed. "A fine seaman. It won't be easy to find him a living won't be the death of him. I'll have to stir my stumps."

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And stir his stumps the captain did. One fine June morning, he drove all the way to Portland to see a friend he thought might have some pull with the Lighthouse Board down Washington way. Two days later he returned like a cheerful gale, blowing down Main Street and into the garden where Saltree was hobbling back and forth between two fruit trees.

"Ahoy there, Mr. Saltree," shouted the captain. "Double grog for all hands and plum duff for dinner." He took the astonished Saltree by the hand and pumped vigorously. "I've news for you — the best. It seems Elisha Tully, who keeps the Land's End Light, is wanting an assistant. I told my old shipmate Captain Drinkwater about you, leg and all, and the long and short of it is that you've the job if you want it. Nobody's saying it's a ship, but it's the sea and plenty to do in a storm." Captain Mayne clasped his hands behind him, very pleased with himself. "It's a good life by all accounts — time to think and time to work and a dry place to lay your head off-watch. When my sailing days are over, we might like to keep a light ourselves, Mrs. Mayne and me."

NO MORE than a week later, Saltree sat on his sea chest on the public pier, waiting for Elisha Tully to row in from Land's End Rock to fetch him. Piled around him were boxes of provisions, a keg of rum, and a small wooden crate marked "Chimneys: Fragile." Round about midmorning, a fat, red-faced man in a torn navy blouse clambered up onto the pier. He stared at Saltree, his sea chest, his groceries, and his "Chimneys: Fragile," and tongued a wad of tobacco from one cheek to the other. "Name of Saltree?"

"Ayuh."

"Elisha Tully. Lighthouse Keeper." Tully bent and heaved Saltree's sea chest onto his shoulder. "Dory's below."

They loaded the dory, Tully handing down crates and Saltree disposing them neatly along the gunwales. When all were stowed, Saltree sat himself down on the rower's bench.

Tully, still on dock, spat thoughtfully into the gray water. "Thought you'd had 'neumony," he said.

"Ayuh," said Saltree, and unshipped the oars.

Tully coiled the bow line and climbed down into the stern. "Not much of a hand at nursemaiding," he remarked.

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"Sure?" Tully squinted doubtfully at him.

"Sure." Saltree pushed off from the pilings and turned the dory around with two economical strokes, then set off slow and steady. He was blown before he'd gone a hundred yards, and by the time they made Land's End Rock, he felt like he'd been flogged. But when they landed, he hoisted the "Chimneys: Fragile" onto his shoulder and carried it over the rocks, steadying himself with his stick. He'd give no man a reason to say that Joshua Saltree was a helpless cripple, twisted leg or no.

"Keepers used to live in the Light," said Tully as they came near it. "There was a room below the watch room, all right and tight. But the new revolving gear took up the watch room, so two, three years back, they built the house." Tully glared for a second at the comfortable shingle house and the horse weather vane trotting bravely on the roof. "Good nor'easter'll snap it into matchsticks one day. Matchsticks!"

Tully lugged Saltree's sea chest inside and led him up a wooden ladder to the assistant keeper's room. Its window looked out onto the light tower and headland beyond. Saltree could see sky in plenty, but no more water than from his room at Captain Mayne's house. He shrugged. He was a landsman now, not a sailor, and he'd best get used to the sight of land.

Downstairs, Tully led Saltree through a short, roofed passage to the iron-bound door of the light itself. There were windows cut in the walls, but they were sealed tight with wooden shutters, and the tower was black as a ship's hold. Groping in the gloom for the rail, Saltree laid his hand on the pitted wall and brought it away chilled and glistening with damp.

Tully's boots clanged upward, and his voice echoed flatly between iron and stone.

"This here's the oil tank, and this here above it's the watch room." Tully opened a manhole into a wilderness of tables and boxes and tools piled higgledy-piggledy on every flat surface. The watch room reeked as strongly as the forecastle of a bad ship, with an unfamiliar metallic tang mixed in with the general stink of sweat, wet wool, and neglect. Saltree frowned.

Tully spat in the direction of a spattered, stinking bucket. "It ain't so bad, really," he said defensively. "Needs a bit of tidying, is all. Man can't keep everything shipshape when he's all on his own like I been. I can put my hand on what I need when I need it." He poked through the flotsam,

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found a bull's-eye lantern, lit it, and hung it from a hook on the wall, where it smoked sullenly.

"Extry chimneys there and there. Wicks, scissors, tool case for the clockwork, clock oil, tripoli, spirits of wine, chamois cloths, brushes, oil carriers."

His grubby forefinger stabbed into the shadows, seemingly at random. Saltree stood and watched until at last Tully said, "What the hell. You'll find all that when you need it. Light's up here."

Slowly, for his leg was aching fiercely, Saltree followed Tully's ample rump up another staircase to a door that led them into a circular gallery. Tully slapped the inner wall. "Lantern base." They mounted a last, flimsy curl of steps.

Remembering how the sun dazzled on the water, Saltree squinted cautiously. Then he stepped into a warm, golden fog and blinked. The whole dome was swathed in cloth: yellow shades blinded the windows; a linen cover shrouded the lens. With a professional twitch, Tully unveiled a thing like a glass cage, tiers of long, louverlike prisms held in place with iron clips. Even in the dim light, it sparkled some.

"Seems sunlight's not good for her," said Tully, "So we keep her covered, days. She's all ready to go. Lighting her's nothing. Real work's in the morning. You'll see."

Saltree did see, the next morning and every morning after. Tully's idea of training was to have his assistant do all the cleaning, polishing, oiling, and adjusting while he, Tully, sat on a crate with his feet on another and nursed a mug of strong coffee laced with rum.

"Not a speck of dust, now," he'd say. "Dust is hell on clockwork. Dust'll throw off a fly governor faster'n rust, and that's saying some. Have you oiled the carriage rollers yet? Well, hop to it, boy. It's gone twelve noon, and you ain't even drained the oil cistern."

Unless there was a storm, Tully insisted on keeping the night watch alone. He'd light the lantern in the evening and eat a plate of hardtack and boiled beef in the kitchen. Come about nine o'clock, he'd get up, scratch in his thick beard, and take the bull's-eye down from the chimney piece. "There's a wreck, I'll wake you," he'd say, and disappear aloft.

Alone, Saltree would smoke a pipe, maybe put an extra polish on a brass oilcan, darn a sock, look at a newspaper if they had one, and then go

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up to his attic room and watch the light pulsing its forty-second beam, twenty-second eclipse. The light, gathered and refracted by those hundred carefully ground prisms, cut through the night like lightning — its illumination self-contained, unrevealing. Beam. Eclipse. Beam. Here are rocks, it seemed to say. Here is harbor. Beam. Eclipse. Beam. Here . . . Am . . . I.

Compared to being second mate on a clipper, it was as easy berth. No long watches, no standing perched on an icy yardarm hauling at wet canvas with numb and swollen hands. No captain to curse at him, no first mate to lord it over him, no seamen to get uppity. No yarns, no songs, no jigs amidships. An easy berth. But a solitary one.

In October a carrier pigeon brought the news that the *White Goddess* had been cleared for San Francisco, and that Captain Mayne sent his kind regards and was counting on seeing Mr. Saltree and his light again sometime before midsummer. Though as a rule he wasn't a drinking man, Saltree locked himself in his attic that night with a blanket thrown over the window and dined on Tully's rum. He drank until his head spun and his leg no longer pained him. He drank until he like to have drowned, but the liquor, whistling in his ears like wind in the rigging, could not drown the pain of the *Goddess* skimming the wave crests without him.

By November, Saltree had polished every oil carrier, honed every knife and scissors blade, arranged all the tools and glass chimneys in gleaming, ordered rows, and generally overhauled the watch room until everything about it was entirely shipshape and Bristol fashion. The days were dull, though they went by quickly enough. Lighthouses take a good deal of keeping, what with swabbing the lens with spirits of wine, greasing the clockwork of the turning mechanism, dusting and trimming and winding all the gears and wicks, rollers and fittings of brass and iron that together create that forty-second beam and twenty-second eclipse.

But the nights were long and filled with dreams.

No sooner did Saltree lay down his head, than he was aloft on the rigging of the *White Goddess* or striding down her deck. His legs were strong, and under his bare brown feet, the timers shone clean and white as flax. His watch — the larboard watch — set up rigging, tarred down the spars. The sun was warm on his shoulders. Gulls and terns wheeled in the wide sky, blue, then gray, then black with clouds foaming and churning like the black water that licked at the crosstrees. Rope between his hands,

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salt water to his waist, clutching his feet, chilling his bones, his heart pounding fast and hard, Tom Harris beside him, grinning wider and wider until his whole face was teeth and bone and wisps of rotted hair.

Other dreams rang with cries of "Man overboard!" and Captain Mayne at the leeward rail, pointing down at the heaving waves. "For God's sake, man. He saved your life!" Making for the rail, laboring on one leg, lurching. Tom below, laughing, and in his arms the Goddess, carved lips parted and smiling. Wood and living flesh entwined, they rolled upon the swell like sleeping birds, then she drew Tom down, down below the black water.

Saltree always woke from these dreams half-strangled with unuttered shouts. He'd rub the sweat from his face, then sit at the edge of his bed and watch the light's signal pattern. Beam. Eclipse. Beam. Eclipse. Forty seconds' light. Twenty seconds' dark. Steady, sure as a heartbeat. The Land's End Light.

THE FIRST day of the New Year, Tully went ashore to buy provisions. The sky threatened snow, but they were down to their last mouthful of salt beef and moldy bread, so off he sculled. He left just after daybreak, in plenty of time to buy what was needful, raise a tankard or three at the Mermaid's Tale, and row back to the Rock again before dark.

Midafternoon, the wind rose and the sea with it. It grew bitter cold, and Saltree stopped puttering with the clockwork to climb out on the parapet and rub the windows with glycerin and spirits of wine to keep them from icing over. Before he was half-done, heavy flakes of snow began to slap at his cheeks. Tully'd be a fool to row back in this, when there was beer and company and a warm bed at the Tale.

Tully always kept a hammock rigged in the watchroom, and about midnight, Saltree climbed into it. The storm had settled into a steady blow, nothing that should give any trouble to a captain worth his brandy. He couldn't sleep, of course, but he had to rest his leg, which was aching like billy hell from the cold. In an hour or so, he'd get up and rewind the fog bell.

Within the granite tower, the sound of the storm was muted to a whistle and a far grumble of breaking waves. Saltree climbed the mainmast in a brisk wind with all canvas shown. Saint Elmo's fire danced ghostly on the crosstrees, and a flight of petrels canted and mewed above

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the skysail. Tom Harris clung one-handed to the topgallant yard.

"Land ho!" he cried, and pointed into the gathering clouds. A cheer below, and all the sails bellied full as the *Goddess* rose above the swell and flew over the wave-crests like a skipped stone. It was snowing now, land ahead, and nothing to say where. Perched among the shrouds, Saltree squinted into the blizzard. Where were the lights? Every coast had lights. Did the snow hide them? Then where were the fog bells? And why was Captain Mayne running blind before a gale into land?

A crash and a shudder spilled Saltree from his hammock, dazed and half-convinced he was still aboard the *Goddess*, and she was breaking up on the rocks of some unknown coast. The waves made a deafening roar, and a cold wind flooded down the turret stairs. That, or guilt at falling asleep, chilled him to the bone. He shivered like a beaten dog and blinked. Was that snow, coming down inside the tower? And what was that hullabaloo?

A good sailor leaps to what needs doing, and Saltree leaped now, swarming up the stairs like rigging. In the dome, wind and snow eddied, blinding white, then ghostly as the lens turned slowly on its carriage. It took Saltree a full two cycles of beam and eclipse to see the broken pane of glass and the bird that had broken it flapping through the shards.

"Bloody stupid bird," Saltree swore, and lunged. The bird was farther from him than he'd thought, but his hand closed on one powerfully flailing wing. It whipped its head around to peck at him with a bill like a marlinespike, and he ducked. Big gull, he thought. Looks like — the wing jerked from his grasp — an albatross.

"Devil take it." It was almost a prayer. There were tales of shipwreck and sudden death caused by killing the bird that brought fair winds and guided ships blown off-course to safe harbors. Saltree knew that the greater part of these tales were nothing but so much rope yarn spun on the off-watch by bored seamen, but there was no denying that albatross were uncanny birds. He had seen them asleep on the water off Cape Horn, riding the swells from crest to trough. He had seen them perched on the masthead, so white in the sun that they seemed lit from inside. The sight of this one, bedraggled and blood-splattered, frightened him more than a twenty-foot wave.

While Saltree hung fire, the albatross flapped and heaved its way inside the glass cage of the lens and up onto the lantern base. Briefly, it

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mantled with the light behind it, and the lens distorted it into a giant thing with wings like sails and an eye like the moon in eclipse.

Gears ground. The carriage, slowed, strained; and the albatross, screaming, battered its wings. A chimney broke. One wick went out; the others flickered wildly. Saltree found the trimming knife and crawled toward the bird. He was a lighthouse keeper now, he told himself, and his light was threatened. It didn't matter whether a gull or an albatross or a mermaid or King Nepture himself was sitting in that lantern. It didn't belong there, and it was up to him, Saltree, to get it out.

Saltree crooked one arm across his face to protect his eyes, and wormed his way into the lens.

Inside was a second storm of feathers and blood. The albatross's feet were entangled in the turning mechanism, and it attacked the clockwork with wings and darting beak. Shadows and light glittered in Saltree's eyes until he could have sworn that a thousand albatross were trapped in the prisms. He thrust blindly with the knife. A final scream, a convulsive flutter. The light flared, and a thousand albatross scattered into the snowy darkness. The last wick went out.

Moving painfuly, Saltree crawled out of the lantern and toward the door, cursing himself for not bringing up the extra lamp. It should have been instinctive, like carrying rope up the rigging. Crews were counting on him: it took no time at all for a ship to run aground.

Downstairs at last, Saltree snatched up an extra lantern, lit it with trembling hands, settled the chimney on it, and pulled himself up the stairs again, hop-and-heave as fast as he could go. It was only a small flame under a glass chimney, hardly bright enough to reach across the dome. But when he slid it into the empty holder, a clear, strong beam leaped into the darkness.

Saltree sighed in relief and turned his attention to the dead albatross. Its wings were singed and bloody, tattered as an old shawl. Carefully, so as not to endanger the lamp, he disentangled the yellow legs from the clockwork. They were thoroughly caught in the gears, and his sweater and hands were slimy with blood before he worked the bird free. He dragged it out of the lens, hoisted it up into his arms, and limped to the window with its feathers trailing against his knees. Under his cold fingers, the body was warm and yielding. Saltree shuddered and threw it from him, out the broken window and into the treacherous wind.

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Clearing blood and feathers from the clockwork and the lens took him the rest of the night. Just before dawn the wind dropped to nothing, but the snow continued heavy and the seas rough. Tully'd not come back today.

Alone, Saltree tacked in a temporary window, cleaned as much of the apparatus as he could without dismounting the frame, and oiled the carriage so it could turn again. He drove himself to wrench the heavy gears apart, strained his back and his legs manhandling wooden boards up the narrow stair. If he hadn't fallen asleep, if he'd killed the albatross right off, then the light wouldn't have gone out. Sure, there was no harm done this time. But what if the *Goddess* had been out there? What if other keepers were as careless, as unfit, as he?

By nightfall, Saltree was wet through and more dog-tired than he'd ever been on ship. He knew he'd have to spend another night in the watch room, but he thought he'd get himself a dry shirt. Then, once he got to his attic room, he thought he'd change his socks. He took a pair from the sea chest, sat on the edge of the bed to put them on, leaned wearily against the wall. He frowned. What if the *Goddess* had been out there?

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He woke after moonset, feeling oddly peaceful. From the sound of the waves on the rocks, it was ebb tide, with a light sea running. He was lying on the bed, fully clothed. "Son of a bitch," he said. But his guilt was as dead as the albatross. His stolen sleep had been deep and dreamless.

A scrape, like a heavy object being dragged over the roof, brought Saltree upright. Silence. The window was luminous with snow light and the lantern's intermittent dazzle. He shrugged. Maybe, as long as he was awake, he'd best get to the tower. Saltree swung his legs to the floor. Between one flash and the next, he caught an odd shadow drifting down the window.

Saltree blinked. Too slow for a gull — and even an albatross wasn't that big. Another — a strange shape. Long, heavy, with strange knots and bulges. Another.

As a fourth shadow swam across the window, Saltree limped painfully across the rough planks. His hands met and clutched the window frame; his face approached the glass. Eclipse: he saw his own reflection staring back at him out of shadowed eyes. Beam: his gaze focused on the dome.

Figureheads: dripping seaweed, some far gone in decay, others still

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bright with paint. They clustered around the lantern like wingless and awkward moths, yearning toward the light. Some were headless, and stretched only their long necks, questing eyelessly for comfort. Some were snapped off at the waist, mere torsos. Most pathetic of all were the ones that retained their faces, for they were openmouthed, drowned, and their wooden eyes stared at the light with a dreadful and accusing intelligence.

One of these figureheads was not so sea-changed as the rest. She hovered between Saltree and the lantern so that at first he saw only her back and the dirty front of her clothes. Then she drifted outside the crowding school of figureheads and showed Saltree her profile. Straight nose; high, round, naked breasts: the white Goddess.

There was a swath of seaweed drapped around her shoulders and tossed across her throat like a bedraggled feather boa, which gave her a rakish look, like a dockside whore. Saltree's hands tightened on the window frame. The Goddess drifted farther around, and he saw that half her wooden head had been sheared away, one breast and shoulder splintered.

Saltree threw open the sash and leaned far out the window. "Goddess!" he shouted, and held out his hand to her.

The White Goddess floated nearer, bobbing with a long swell. Dark water dripped from her like blood. Her eye glittered wetly. Her hand that had held back the carved folds of her drapery released them and reached for him.

Beautiful. She was so beautiful, and as she drew near Saltree, she brought with her the smells of salt and sun-warmed tar and varnish and newly scrubbed decks. His breath came fast; his fingers trembled.

The revolving lens flickered slowly. Forty-second beam: twenty-second eclipse. The figurehead hovered just out of his reach, stretching her fingers to him.

Saltree flung his good leg over the sill, braced the other against his sea chest, and hung from the sash by the length of his arm.

Beam. Eclipse. Beam.

An inch, no more, separated their hands. Eclipse. In the brief darkness, Saltree touched the slick coolness of varnished wood. Beam. His fingers closed on hers, and his mucles strained to pull her into his arms.

Eclipse. Beam. Eclipse.

She was his now, wild sea smell, smooth breasts and all, clinging to his neck like kelp and smiling into his eyes. He felt her body yield to his

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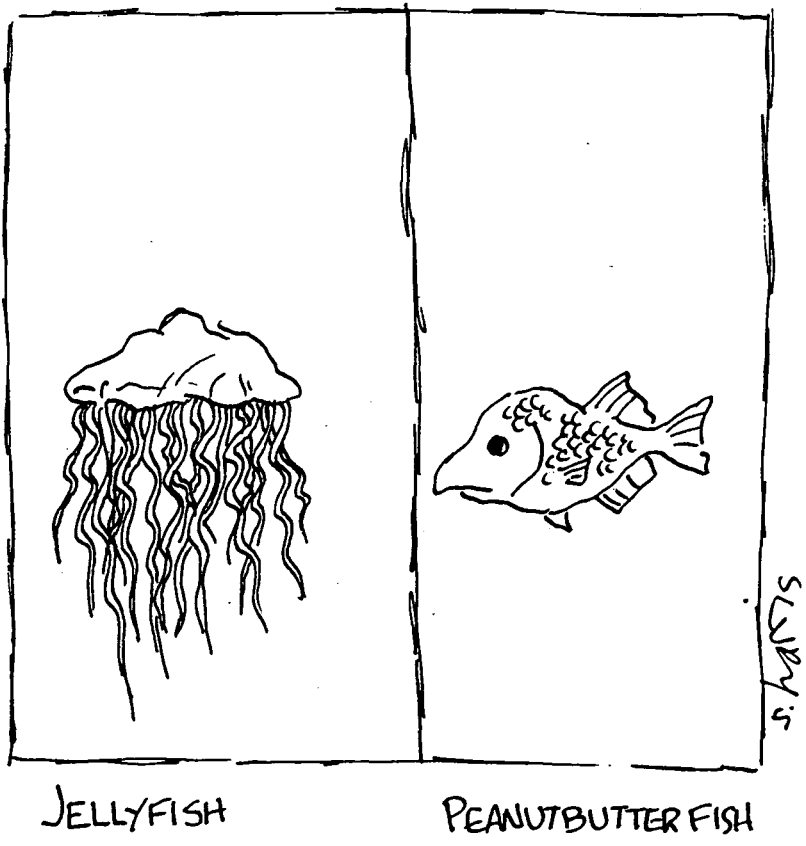
hands like flesh, but cold, so cold. Entwined, buoyant as gulls, they rolled upon the waves, sliding from crest to trough out to the open sea. They sailed beyond the breakers to black water, and then she drew him down with her, gently down to her cold ocean bed.



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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 52

In the November issue, we asked you to vary an SF title to make it non-SF and appealing to those who don't like science fiction. The usual good response, and thanks also for all those ideas for new comps.

The competition police have pointed out in no uncertain terms that the first prize winner in competition 51 bent the rules in an unacceptable fashion. We promise to be more diligent in the future.

FIRST PRIZE

Asimov's NIGHTFALL IN PARIS
Pohl's MAN PLUS WOMAN EQUALS LOVE
Aldiss's HELLICONIA SUMMER OF '42
Le Guin's THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS: THE ART OF HAND SHADOWS
Delany's NOVA SCOTIA

— Christopher J. Healy
Baldwin, NY

SECOND PRIZE

Asimov's THE ROBOTS OF TONY ORLANDO AND DAWN
Bradbury's THE SPORTS ILLUSTRATED MAN
Heinlein's STRANGER IN A STRANGE LANDROVER
Asimov's FANTASTIC VOYAGE, WISH YOU WERE HERE
Delany's BOSSA NOVA IN TEN EASY LESSONS

— C.E. Coffman
S.A. Concannon
N.E. Stokes
Newark, DE

RUNNERS UP

Sheckley's CITIZEN IN SPACE: A GUIDE TO INVESTING IN AERO-SPACE TECHNOLOGY
Simak's MASTODONIA: CRIME OR BAD HABIT?
Sturgeon's MORE THAN HUMAN: FULFILLING YOUR POTENTIAL
Dick's TIME OUT OF JOINT: WHY I'LL NEVER RETURN TO PRISON
Leiber's A SPECTER IS HAUNTING TEXAS: THE COST OF BAILING OUT THE LONE STAR STATE'S SAVINGS & LOANS

— Steve Lindquist
Winona, MN

Asimov's FOUNDATION, ROUGE AND EYELINER
Reed's THE HORMONE JUNGLE: CAUSES AND CURES FOR PMS
Turtledove's TRAVEL AGENT OF BY-ZANTIUM
Effinger's WHAT TO DO WHEN GRAVITY FAILS

— Alison Becker
Chicago, IL

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Asimov's YOU AND ME, ROBOT
Clarke's CHILDHOOD'S END AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT
Clarke's 2001: AN ILLUSTRATED CALENDAR
Bradbury's THE FARENHEIT 451 COOKBOOK
Clarke's RENDEZVOUS AT THE RAMADA

— David Brown
Newark, NJ

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Asimov's DAVID STARR, TEXAS RANGER
Clarke's RENDEZVOUS WITH RAMBO
Bradbury's THE MARTIN CHRONICLES
Adams, HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO NEW BRUNSWICK
Le Guin's THE REPOSSESSED
— Patricia Russo
North Bergen, NJ

Niven's TALES OF KNOWN SPACE—HEATERS
Heinlein's PINOCCHIO AND THE PUPPET MASTERS
Capek's R.U.R. HAVE YOU EVER BEEN...
Anderson's CAMP FIRE TIME
— Sean Walbeck
Bellingham, WA

Bester's THE STARS' HOMES MY DESTINATION
Heinlein's THERESA MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS
Aldiss's BILLION DOLLAR SPREE
Heinlein's THE MUPPET PASTORS
— Christine Morris
Albuquerque, NM

COMPETITION 53 (suggested by John Brunner)

Send up to a dozen samples of cover or flap copy that makes it clear the person responsible has read nothing but the title and misunderstood even that: e.g.:

BUYING TIME: It was the fearful day when everyone but EVERYONE rampaged madly through stores and supermarkets!
CHILDHOOD'S END: A searing expose of teenage sex!
MIRRORSHADES: Ghosts through the looking glass! A fantasy to outdo Lewis Carroll!

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by March 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 53 will appear in the July Issue.

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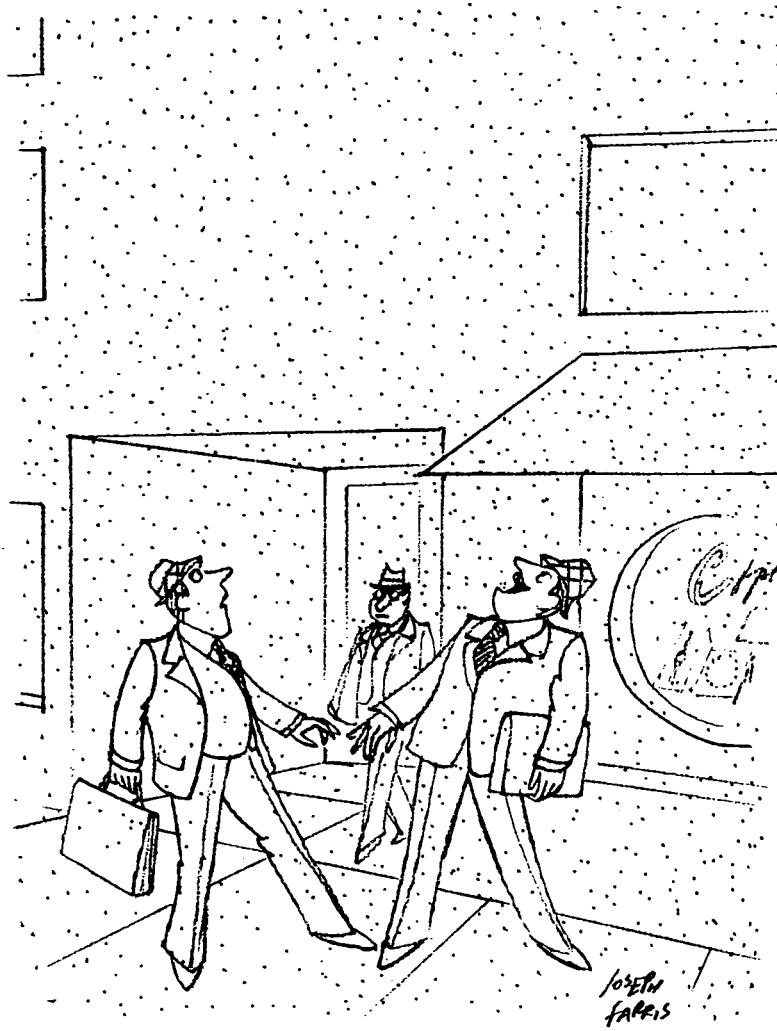

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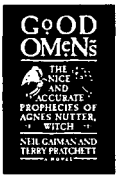

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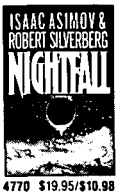

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